



April 3, 2019

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Before the
**House Foreign Affairs Committee, Sub-Committee on the Middle East,
North Africa, and International Terrorism**

Hearing on Assessing U.S. Policy Priorities in the Middle East

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the topic of the United States' policy in the Middle East. I would like to offer several observations of current dynamics in the region, and follow with an assessment of current U.S. policy and recommendations moving forward.

I. What the United States Contends with Today in the Middle East

Two consecutive administrations of the United States have witnessed fundamental changes to the shape and execution of power in the Middle East. Some of these changes were instigated by the United States, including those springing from the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Others, including the series of domestic uprisings that spread across the region in 2011 that led to violence and, in some cases civil war, were indigenous and had nothing directly to do with the United States.

Nonetheless, the aggregate consequences of these and other changes have resulted in an evolving and complex landscape:

1. Nation states and institutions have suffered serious blows, and states upon whom the U.S. relied for regional matters — such as Egypt — have turned inward, while other nation states — like Libya and Syria— have disintegrated entirely. This has caused power vacuums to emerge where state and non-state actors are testing limits and competing.
2. Non-state actors such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS), Lebanese Hezbollah, and other non-state actors have sought to exploit the vacuums and subsequent ungoverned political and physical spaces.
3. These vacuums also have spurred competition that is multi-layered and proxy-executed between states and across the region, the most notable being the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but along so-called “Islamist” (Qatar, Turkey supported) and “anti-Islamist” (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and also in a different way, Israel), and other fault-lines as well.

Bold.

Innovative.

Bipartisan.

Against this backdrop, the center of gravity in terms of regional power centers has shifted more attention east of the Suez and towards the Gulf.¹

The perception of the last decade is of a United States that is withdrawing from its interests and its presence in the region, a perception built on domestic war fatigue, changes in the geo-strategic landscape featuring a rising China and a reasserting Russia, the emergence of U.S. energy independence, and any number of other factors.

Whether the perception is correct or not is no longer the point. This view has unsettled partners and encouraged competitors. Regional partners are more likely now to enact their own policies on regional affairs independent of U.S. views.

American leverage is further eroded as partners are exercising more agency; partners are less and less willing to concede to the United States about what is best for the region. This all despite the fact that U.S. force posture in the region is still formidable. Current numbers are less available, but estimates from late 2017 were in the 50-60,000 range for troop numbers alone across 13 or 14 countries and dozens of missions in the region.²

Finally, consistent with geo-strategic changes, great power competition has also flourished in the region. China finds in the region a receptive environment for its economic policies while Russia finds room to pursue a multi-pronged strategy that strengthens its overall hand by filling gaps left by the United States. Each offers an alternative model to regional players as compared to the U.S.: no strings attached cooperation that don't require them to align with values or make any changes in the way they conduct themselves domestically or internationally. While neither Russia nor China can match U.S. traditional presence or influence in the short-term, both are exploiting the real and imagined U.S. absence for their own gains. Russia has re-engaged on military cooperation and diplomatic mediation beyond Syria to Egypt, Libya, and of course Israel and the Gulf. And China continues to pursue its Belt and Road Initiative throughout the region alongside modest forays into the security space.³

¹ Bruce Jones et al, "The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's role in a Changing Region," The Brookings Institute (October 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_20190107_new_geopolitics_of_mena_final.pdf

² Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East," Chatham House (October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-18-us-military-policy-middle-east-zenko-final.pdf>

This number does not include contractor support presence, and other kinds of missions for which hard numbers are not available, the thousands of regional counterparts that benefit from the hundreds of thousands of dollars in U.S. security training or the billions in arms sales.

³ Johnathan Fulton, "China's power in the Middle East is Rising," The Washington Post (August 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/08/09/chinas-rise-in-the-middle-east/?utm_term=.5339b2a9db37

II. Why Does It Matter Anyway?

U.S. policy toward the Middle East in the last 40 years was predicated on several traditional strategic interests, to include: preserving the reliable flow of global energy supplies and commercial activity; preventing the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction; supporting the security and stability of U.S. partners, including Israel; countering terrorism; and supporting prosperity for the region's people and defending universal human rights.

In pursuit of all these interests, the United States deployed its competitive advantage: investments of significant diplomatic and economic capital into the region — diplomacy and development backed up by force through the deployment of military assets. The United States enjoyed being the partner of choice and necessity in the region, certainly since the Iran-Iraq War and first Gulf War.

But the two previous administrations and the current one have grappled with serial regional crises that do not always fit squarely into one of the above interests, but press for disproportionate U.S. attention nonetheless.⁴ Today, after years of war, the U.S. position has changed, and to a lesser extent so have its interests. Threats in the region now emanate as much from non-state extremist actors like ISIS and hegemonic and asymmetric actors such as Iranian proxies as from conventional security threats to partners' sovereignty. Instability is as much a function of internal systemic economic and governance failures across most of the region as from WMD. Combatting terrorism threats to the homeland remains a priority, as does nonproliferation. But U.S. vital interest as an energy consumer has changed (though it hasn't been eliminated). And recent years have shown that much of the strife generated in the region is of its own making, and importantly, more within the region's power ultimately to resolve.⁵ While some countries, particularly in the Gulf, have expanded economically in the last decade, the overall trend in job opportunity and economic equality in the region is discouraging, and experts indicate there is little room for optimism.⁶ Recent protests in Algeria and elsewhere remind us that the powder keg that exploded in 2011 has not been spent.

As well, a false dichotomy has emerged in recent years surrounding whether the U.S. interests in the region truly endure. Some argue that the threats to U.S. interests are stronger today than ever and therefore require a doubling-down of U.S. commitment, while others argue that U.S. over-investment in the region has had devastating consequences, prompting a desire to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

In such a fractious debate it's easy, though unproductive, to paint one side as authoritarian supporters and warmongers, and the other anti-war naifs. The truth of course lies somewhere in the middle.

⁴ "Leveraging U.S. Power in the Middle East," Center for American Progress (October 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/10/19/146283/leveraging-u-s-power-in-the-middle-east/>

Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2019 Issue), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory?cid=otr-authors-january_february_2019-121118

⁶ Rami Khouri, "Why We Should Worry About the Arab Region," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (February 2019), <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/why-we-should-worry-about-arab-region>

Long-time experts in U.S. policy towards the Middle East caution that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East: its challenges come knocking on the door sooner or later, whether in the form of clear and imminent threats, such as terrorism or nuclear proliferation, or slower and more intractable threats, like the humanitarian crises caused by refugee movements that have severe reverberations inside *and* outside the region.

The reality is that the United States cannot fully extricate itself from the region and should not try to do so. However, it could deploy itself in a smarter and more effective way.

III. Where is U.S. Policy Today?

U.S. policy towards the region, particularly in the last two years, has been marked by inconsistency and confusion. Admittedly, this administration inherited some of the systemic challenges outlined above. But it also inherited strategies, some of which it has managed to pursue with some success. The counter-ISIS campaign, for example, has achieved its military goals. But this campaign in particular, and comprehensive counter-terrorism efforts in general, never end with battlefield wins. In fact, the counter-ISIS campaign may be at the end of a phase, but that is not the end of the road. The counter-narrative aspects of the campaign, the political conflicts that opened ungoverned space in which ISIS grew, and the important work of stabilization are still necessary to longer-term success. In the counter-ISIS campaign, as on the issue of U.S. strategy in the region, the administration has failed to articulate a clear and realistic approach. It oscillates instead between on the one hand treating regional complexities as transactional engagements (for example, U.S. support of the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition in Yemen alluded to as almost a quid pro quo for Gulf arms purchases from the U.S.), and on the other hand espousing grandiose aspirations that do not reflect realities on the ground (e.g., Secretary Pompeo's 2019 Cairo speech).

And in some cases, the administration has adopted de facto approaches that can only be characterized as exacerbations:

1. Perpetuating a sense of unpredictability and unreliability: The perception of U.S. withdrawal may have been seeded in the previous administration, but heightened over the course of the 2016 presidential campaign and since this administration took office. The president's propensity to talk about the Middle East as an endless quagmire, or about a set of partners who do not carry their own weight, has contributed to the sense of uncertainty. Some governments in the region may embrace a more aggressive and frank tone, like the one the administration has adopted on Iran, but they privately continue to harbor concerns about where the administration is likely to go next. So they continue to hedge, turn to near-peer competitors like Russia and China. The most salient example may have been the president's December pronouncement of troop withdrawals from eastern Syria. While that decision has been walked back, it nonetheless has made partners in the region wonder how they can rely on U.S. support for the anti-ISIS or anti-Iran campaigns — both impacted by the withdrawal announcement — if the President is given to spontaneous policy announcements. The decision to withdraw unilaterally from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is another such decision. It may have been telegraphed previously and even applauded by some regional partners in the short-term, but has highlighted questions about U.S. trustworthiness in the longer term.
2. Relying on cults of personality rather than statecraft: Again, to the satisfaction of some regional leaders, the administration has placed a high value on personal relations at an individual level.

This has currency in the Middle East. But these relationships — whether between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or President al-Sisi — carry with them an odor of personal benefit over strategic interest. These relationships also come at the expense of more institutional state-to-state relations and people-to-people engagement. While personal relations between leaders may have appeared strained in the previous administration, the strategic relationships enjoyed unprecedented and institutionally deep and enduring cooperation. Reliance on personal relationships may be politically fruitful in the short-term, but can weaken ties between the United States and key regional partners in the long-term as it casts them in a partisan light and devalues diplomacy as “the tool of first resort.” While the State Department’s professional staff continue to execute their work faithfully, their efforts to assert U.S. leverage are undermined by a shared understanding by partners in the region that they act without the full-throated support of the administration’s leadership. This has served to weaken U.S. influence in the region. And finally, disproportionate focus on select personal relationships obscures policy interests elsewhere in the region such as Tunisia, Morocco, or Jordan, or even Libya, and Iraq.

3. Promulgating rhetoric but not clear plans: This administration sometimes says all the right things as far as some in the region are concerned: the rhetoric on Iran could hardly be more aggressive, for example. And that approach is not without some logic given Iran’s regional policies, the campaign narrative and views held by senior administration officials. However, there is little indication that the words are matched with deeds. Yes, economic sanctions have taken a front seat and anecdotally have had some bite. But, then again, decisions such as the Syria withdrawal, the lack of active and senior level engagement with Iraq post ISIS military campaign, or the absence of U.S. leverage at the highest levels supporting and pressing for diplomatic efforts in Yemen, or the want for a broad approach to Lebanon illustrate that there is not a comprehensive regional strategy on Iran.⁷ These challenges are exacerbated by the administration’s announced maximalist objectives and an over-reliance on sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Similarly, the administration has sent conflicting public messages with respect to the rift between Gulf states, but seems to have downgraded its efforts to broker a return to the status quo ante of a cold peace between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
4. Ignoring bad actions in pursuit of “wins”: As a corollary to the president’s affinity for “strong” leaders, the administration’s approach of seemingly refusing to use its natural leverage to press partners, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where they act inconsistently with U.S. interests conveys a sense that some partners have a blank check from the White House to act with impunity. The administration may argue that the adventurism or missteps by regional partners are not important when compared to core U.S. interests like the counter-ISIS or counter-Iran campaigns. But some partners’ actions at minimum conflict with long-held U.S. concerns, and at worse undermine U.S. publicly professed strategy. For example, the root causes of war in Yemen are complex and pose real threats to regional and U.S. interests. But the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition’s actions after four years have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the conflict drags on and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates find their intervention ineffective and their reputations damaged, Iran increasingly sees its marginal and relatively recent materiel support for the Houthis as an inexpensive means of exploiting the instability to secure

⁷ Center for a New American Security, “A Realistic Path for Progress on Iran,” (January 2019), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-realistic-path-for-progress-on-iran>

strategic advantage over Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and in turn, the United States.⁸ The U.S. still brings value to partners in the Middle East, and that affords the United States the opportunity to express concerns when warranted, and press for changes in approach when required.

IV. Recommendations for Where Policy and Congress Could Go

Middle East policy has presented no shortage of challenges in recent memory. In the coming months and years the United States, and Congress in particular, will need to keep a watchful eye on signs of resurgence of groups like ISIS and al-Qa'eda; the disintegration of internationally supported political processes in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere; the unintended escalation and conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, or in the Gulf and Red Sea; the weight of humanitarian and displacement crises and refugee pressures from and in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen; the ever-increasing use of repressive means against peaceful citizens across the region; and the consequences of unanswered economic and political grievances. Within all that complexity, there are a number of immediate steps Congress could adopt:

1. **Congress should hold the administration to account for a complete Iran strategy.** The administration's Iran strategy is focused primarily on its economic pressure campaign. And while Iran remains relatively faithful to its current commitments under the JCPOA, there is no imminent crisis to avert. The economic pressure can mount (whether or not it can ultimately succeed, especially outside of a multilateral approach, is a different question); Iran, meanwhile, has not fundamentally changed any of its regional policies despite the U.S.' strategy of admonishment. But economic pressure is not an end unto itself. Should Iran elect to abandon its obligations under the agreement, the situation could quickly consume the administration's and Congress' attention. What is the administration's overall strategy? How might it map out a path to the diplomatic engagement necessary to get the "better deal" it believes it can achieve? How can the administration pursue its objectives regarding Iran without further alienating U.S. allies? How does it assess Iran's willingness and strategy with respect to the nuclear program, its upcoming elections, and its overall negotiations posture? How will it maintain pressure on Iran to restrain its regional policies in the interim and during possible negotiations? These are questions the administration, two years in, should be able to answer. Congress should ask for these briefings and exercise its oversight on an Iran strategy.
2. **Congress should act consistent with the notion that diplomacy and development are tools of first resort.**⁹ This includes continuing the trend of restoring budgets to the State Department and to the U.S. Agency for International Development, but also consistently exercising oversight of and positive support for those agencies in their hiring, programming, and policy implementation. It also means that Congress should use its oversight powers to insist that the administration pursue diplomatic ways, means, and ends. Just a few areas where diplomatic efforts could be a benefit:

⁸ Nicholas Heras and Elisa Catalano Ewers, "Congressional Action on Yemen Isn't Only About Yemen," Center for a New American Security (February 2019), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/h-j-res-37-congressional-action-on-yemen-isnt-only-about-yemen>

William Burns, "The Lost Art of American Diplomacy," Foreign Affairs (March 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-27/lost-art-american-diplomacy>

- *To actively support the political negotiations to ease the conflict in Yemen.* The reality remains that the United States has the most leverage to bring to bear on the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition. It must continue to press the parties to cooperate with the UN's efforts to expand the ceasefires, allow for humanitarian relief, and cajole myriad Yemeni groups to resolve their long-standing conflicts through a political process. This does not mean conceding to Houthi disproportionate control. And also does not mean abandoning the real threats the Houthi militias have posed to waterways and to Saudi territory. But it must press partners to abandon zero sum formulations for political resolution while also taking concrete steps to defend and disrupt missile threats on land and sea.
- *To compete for influence in Iraq.* Sustaining a full partnership with Iraq is in U.S. interests across the board: economic, counter-terrorism, political inclusivity. Reducing Iraq to a pro-or anti-Iranian asset ignores the benefits of continuing to build strong and reliable relationships with all elements of Iraq's political and civil society.

Finally, Congress should ensure that we field the strongest team possible to pursue diplomacy on par with other tools in the U.S. kit: that means confirming qualified career and political ambassadors and senior officials at the State Department.

3. **Congress should insist that U.S. support to partners does not come with a blank check, but with a firm commitment to hold partners accountable for their actions.** The United States still provides an overwhelming security guarantee to the region through, if nothing else, its sheer presence. It provides economic and investment opportunities beyond almost any other potential partner. The benefits of U.S. partnership to the region go beyond these few examples, even in the context of perceived and real U.S. retrenchment. All that to say that the United States still retains significant leverage in its relationships, if it chooses to exercise it. If the U.S. does not exercise its leverage, it risks losing it either by being seen as too weak, or too divided to do so. This does not mean necessarily shaming partners or undercutting U.S. interests without cause. But it does mean we should expect partners to maintain a policy of no surprises — U.S.-Saudi relations are a good example of this.¹⁰ Whether it comes in the form of publicly brow-beating the Lebanese head of state, or diplomatic escalation with Canada, or continued operations in Yemen that disregard the devastating, deadly impact on civilian populations. The U.S. should employ its diplomatic powers, privately and publicly when necessary, to curb the most problematic of these instincts. And in the case of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Congress has the power to demand at least an objective examination and transparent presentation of the intelligence and other information, so as to draw its independent conclusions. And it should continue to vocalize the need to protect journalists and free and peaceful expression everywhere.

Congress can play a useful role in using the power of its pulpit and its purse to telegraph to partners that they do not have a blank check to operate in ways that are inconsistent with U.S. values and interests, And beyond Saudi Arabia, such leverage should apply whether pressing partners not to exacerbate conditions in Libya by proxy extension, or to reconsider the sale of sensitive surveillance technologies that can be used for repressive means. Congress can pursue a bipartisan approach to the region that does not create room for partners to choose one side over

¹⁰ Derek Chollet and Ilan Goldenberg, "the United States Should Give Saudi Arabia a Choice," Foreign Policy (November 2018), <https://Foreignpolicy.Com/2018/11/30/Saudi-Arabia-Should-Be-Given-A-Choice-Stop-the-Surprises-or-Suffer-the-Consequences-Mbs-Khashoggi/>

another. There is plenty of room for agreement, whether it be support for Israel's security while also keeping the road to peace open and a two-state solution viable, or reaffirming commitments to the security of regional partners in the Gulf without conceding that proxy wars that further inflame existing instability in half a dozen countries in the region are in the U.S. interest. Prioritizing institutionalized ties over personal relations are critical to a bipartisan and unified national strategy regarding friends and foes alike.

4. **Congress should continue to use its voice and its convening authority to caution against actions that are inconsistent with U.S. values and interests.** The United States should not consider the dissolution of partnerships in the region. It is impractical, and does not serve U.S. interests. But our policy can and should assess its relationships honestly and in all their complexity. Consulting and coordinating with partners closely on shared interests is vital. Similarly, it is critical to remind partners that the United States views human rights violations and overall repressive policies as part of the continuum of regional instability. It is worthwhile remembering that the United States retains those characteristics and values that defined its rise to leadership as a singular superpower in the last century.

While there may be need for healthy domestic discussion about what shape American exceptionalism takes in today's world,¹¹ the United States remains unmatched in its people, values, and innovative spirit, and can still model that approach both to its friends and its adversaries. This need not be zero-sum, but rather a realistic and achievable approach that requires modest action and can be implemented consistently. Congress can keep such a discussion public and present, and check any indications that partners are acting with impunity against U.S. values and interests.

¹¹ Jake Sullivan, "What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America," *The Atlantic* (January/February 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/yes-america-can-still-lead-the-world/576427/>