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Strategic Adaptation

Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

By Bruce W. Jentleson, Andrew M. Exum, Melissa G. Dalton
and J. Dana Stuster



Center for a
New American
Security
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Cover Image

Tens of thousands of people gather in Tahrir Square to protest against the military backed government in Cairo on November 21, 2011.

(SHAWN BALDWIN/Corbis/APImages)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Executive Summary	5
II. Introduction: Why a New U.S. Strategy?	7
III. U.S. Interests in the Middle East: Continuity and Change	9
IV. Evolving Strategic Context	11
V. Strategic Adaptation: Priorities and Trends	20
VI. Conclusion	36

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STRATEGIC ADAPTATION: TOWARD A NEW U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Bruce W. Jentleson, Andrew M. Exum, Melissa G. Dalton and J. Dana Stuster

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Bruce W. Jentleson, Andrew M. Exum,
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The United States must recalibrate its strategies to address the sweeping changes across the Middle East. An approach of “strategic adaptation” would focus on the near-term crises that are most salient to U.S. interests, prioritize political reform in the region and address long-term trends while mitigating risks.¹ Acute crises in the Middle East today threaten U.S. interests. But if the United States manages long-term trends with strategic flexibility and diplomatic ingenuity, over time, it may become significantly less vulnerable to threats in the region.

This report explores the interplay of U.S. interests in the Middle East, how the strategic context in the region has changed and the attendant effects on U.S. interests. It concludes by offering a framework to guide policymaking. This framework outlines priorities, focused on both near-term threats and long-term trends, to help U.S. policymakers serve the nation’s interests going forward.

The real risk for U.S. strategy in the Middle East is an unwillingness to recognize how profoundly the strategic context has changed and the need for strategies that reflect this changed context. The United States is overinvested in the most undemocratic regimes in the region. For years, this has been the “safe” strategy, but it puts U.S. interests at risk in the longer term. This is not a new observation, but the Arab Spring makes this reality more evident than before.

While some U.S. interests have remained consistent and some have changed in importance, others are in tension for the first time. Five main regional developments characterize the changing strategic context: shifting regional threats, the transformative politics of the Arab Spring, changes in the scope and magnitude of the threat of terrorism, the mix of cooperation and tensions in U.S.-Israeli relations and trends affecting energy security.

Given this evolving strategic context, we propose a set of priorities for U.S. policymakers. In the near

term, the United States must address crises that immediately threaten the country's interests. These crises include:

- The Iranian nuclear weapons program.
- The civil wars in Syria and Yemen.
- Fresh tensions between Israel and Egypt, which endanger the peace between them.

At the same time, policymakers should address three trends that, over time, could either compromise U.S. interests or decrease America's exposure to risks in the region. The United States should begin adapting its policies now to harness the potential and mitigate the risks of these long-term trends:

- The return of politics to the Arab world and the consequent need to engage Arab publics not just regimes, pursue a differentiated strategy towards political Islam, prioritize political reform, and support social and economic reform.
- Reduced U.S. dependency on the states of the Persian Gulf due to three factors: the impending drawdown of U.S. troops in the region, reduced U.S. demand for regional energy resources and a transition from providing regional security requirements to enabling local states to take more of a lead in regional security. The United States could use this opportunity to adapt force posture and security relationships, and press Gulf regimes to reform, while continuing to plan for possible Iran contingencies and protecting the sea lanes to ensure access for global energy markets.
- Fundamental tensions in the U.S. relationship with Israel and the continuing need to revitalize the Arab-Israeli peace process.

If these trends are managed well, the future may look less threatening to U.S. policymakers than it does at present.

II. INTRODUCTION: WHY A NEW U.S. STRATEGY?

The Middle East is in transition, and the time is right for a fundamental reassessment of key trends there, as well as U.S. interests in the region and the appropriate policy options for pursuing them.

Already, U.S. leaders have signaled their intent to shift resources to East Asia, withdrawn the last remaining soldiers from Iraq and announced plans to draw down the U.S. military commitment in Afghanistan by 2015.² The United States has made these changes after a series of revolutions that many political scientists and policy analysts thought unlikely but in retrospect seem inevitable.³

After more than a year of upheaval, we can see clearly some of the faulty assumptions on which U.S. policy has rested for many years. These assumptions include:

- The United States could rely on Arab regimes for security cooperation and stability in the oil and natural gas markets without emphasizing political and economic reforms.⁴
- The Arab-Israeli peace process, even if halting, would progress toward a two-state solution.
- Relations with Israel, though often contentious, would continue to be grounded by a uniform strategic outlook.
- The United States is the primary actor in the region and could effectively counter adversaries and antagonists.

All these assumptions need revision. The unrest in Bahrain illustrates the difficulty the United States faces when an autocracy with which it is allied cracks down on the democratic aspirations of its people. The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians is moribund, while relations between the United States and Israel have been stressed due to differing threat perceptions and priorities.⁵ Iran and its proxies continue to challenge the United States.

This report systematically reconsiders U.S. policy in the Middle East, beginning with U.S. interests and ending with policy recommendations that reflect those interests as well as the ways in which the region has changed in recent years. We build our analysis around three core questions:

- What are U.S. interests in the region?⁶
- What are the driving forces in the region that shape the context in which the United States pursues its interests?
- Given these interests and the strategic context, what are the priorities and options for U.S. policymakers?

We propose an approach of “strategic adaptation.” While many new and long-standing U.S. policies remain appropriate, we emphasize adapting to a strategic environment that has changed dramatically and is likely to continue to do so. In particular, there are several near-term threats and challenges emanating from Iran, Syria and Yemen, as well as in Israel-Egypt relations, that require immediate attention from U.S. policymakers. But it is equally important that the United States adapt its policies to harness the potential and mitigate the risks of long-term trends in the region, employing a high degree of strategic flexibility and diplomatic ingenuity.

The very notion of adaptation may strike some as “declinist,” since in some cases we recommend the United States reduce its commitments to the region. The real trap for U.S. strategy in the Middle East, though, is not declinism but denialism – the unwillingness to recognize how profoundly the strategic context has changed. When conditions change or policies are not working, staying the course is less important than the willingness to adapt and to do so in ways that enhance policy effectiveness.⁷ As the eminent realist Hans Morgenthau once warned, the “residues of formerly adequate modes of thought and action now rendered obsolete by a new social reality” only sap the power of great nations.⁸

Research Methods

We employed a variety of methods to test our initial hypotheses and assumptions. We began our research in November 2011 with a competitive analysis exercise to better determine U.S. interests in the region and identify how the United States should prioritize those interests. We recruited two teams of leading scholars and practitioners and asked each the same questions. We then harvested the answers provided, noting where discussions overlapped and where they differed.

In January and February 2012, we gathered more experts to help us think through three areas of focus: U.S. military and intelligence activities in the Middle East, U.S. diplomatic initiatives and approaches there, and economic and development opportunities in the region. Because questions related to U.S. force posture in the Persian Gulf loomed large over all our research, we convened a separate working group in March 2012 to better inform our thinking on that subject. We engaged many experts in academia, the U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as entrepreneurs and investors in the region.⁹ We supplemented these efforts with extensive documentary research and interviews with experts and key decisionmakers.

This report does not attempt to answer every policy question vexing U.S. officials in the Middle East. What we do attempt, though, is to identify the most important risks and opportunities for the United States going forward and make recommendations for how the United States can mitigate the former and take advantage of the latter.

III. U.S. INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The core interests of the United States are typically defined as:

- Protecting the physical security and territorial integrity of the United States and major allies against external attack.
- Ensuring U.S. economic prosperity (commonly associated with maintaining an open international economy).
- Maintaining the “American way of life” – an interest that includes the promotion of U.S. and universal values.

All three of these interests inform the five principal U.S. interests in the Middle East, most of which have shaped U.S. policy for decades.¹⁰

Today, the United States must re-evaluate these interests in the region in light of the evolving dynamics in the Middle East.

Detering, Containing and Defending Against Regional Threats: Geopolitical threats emanating from the Middle East, while still significant, are less salient than in prior periods. Iran is the only state that challenges the United States in the region. We contend that the threat posed by Iran pales in comparison to that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War and is arguably less significant than the Iraq of Saddam Hussein.

Stable Arab Regimes: The United States has prioritized security cooperation and the stability of friendly but authoritarian regimes in the region as a means to other ends, such as countering terrorism and stabilizing the price of oil on the global market. These priorities have trumped other concerns, such as the promotion of democracy or human rights, to the point where stability has become an end itself. Across the region, however, the costs associated with prioritizing security

cooperation over domestic political reform are much greater today than they have traditionally been for U.S. policymakers. The transformative politics of the Arab Spring have empowered new peoples and parties demanding to be heard by both the United States and their regimes. In the long term, regional stability will be found not at the expense of political reform but through it.

Counterterrorism: While U.S. counterterrorism efforts did not begin with the September 11 attacks, in the wake of the attacks policymakers addressed no threat more urgently than the threat posed by al Qaeda and related transnational terrorist organizations. Efforts to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda commanded enormous military and intelligence resources and pushed the United States deeper into relationships with sclerotic regimes, such as those of Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, which subsequently proved unstable. Today, terrorism in the region remains a serious threat but has reduced in both scope and magnitude. Al Qaeda and its affiliates pose a less severe threat due to a variety of factors, including U.S. counterterrorism efforts, the Arab Spring and mistakes made by al Qaeda.

Israeli Security and Arab-Israeli Peace: The United States has ensured Israel’s security and survival since the founding of Israel, an interest reinforced during the Cold War as each country sought to counter proxies of the Soviet Union. The United States and Israel then shared new enemies after the Cold War as both countries struggled against violent Islamist organizations and belligerent regimes in Tehran and Damascus. Since the 1973 October War, making progress toward Arab-Israeli peace has been integral to U.S. efforts to secure Israel.¹¹ The United States brokered the peace agreements between Israel and both Jordan and Egypt and has, since the 1990s, led international efforts to broker a peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The United States has periodically been at odds with its Israeli ally with respect

to the proper means to achieve peace. Recently, though, while interests remain shared and cooperation strong in many areas, U.S.-Israeli tensions have grown more substantial. Beyond the lack of personal warmth between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, broader differences in threat perceptions and strategies, as well as political changes in both countries, are stressing the relationship.

Stable Access to Affordable Oil: Until the early 1970s, oil flowed freely. Since the 1973 October War and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) embargo, the United States has dedicated more military resources and diplomatic efforts toward ensuring access to the region's hydrocarbon resources. Today, the United States is growing less dependent on that access thanks to reduced U.S. consumption and new domestic energy sources.¹² Yet the Persian Gulf remains important, in part because the global economy remains vulnerable to interruptions in the flow of oil and gas, and because oil is priced as a global commodity. The financial crisis that began in 2007, meanwhile, has been followed by a fragile recovery that itself would be imperiled by any serious inability to bring the oil and gas resources of the Persian Gulf to market.

IV. EVOLVING STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Regional Threats

A variety of factors make the Middle East less important to the United States than in years past. As the United States winds down its military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the threat of transnational terrorism ebbs, it relies less on regional regimes for diplomatic, military and intelligence cooperation. Several near-term challenges will hinder the ability of the United States to rebalance its attention to focus more on Asia and other priority areas:¹³ Iran, potential fallout from conflicts in Yemen and Syria, and worries about the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

IRAN

Iran is the only state that poses a major threat to U.S. interests in the region. Its unwillingness to abide by its nonproliferation commitments threatens U.S. interests in regional stability, the security of Israel and the overall nonproliferation regime. Iranian support for violent extremist organizations in Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza, meanwhile, facilitates terrorism and contributes to further instability in the region. Iran continues to stifle nonviolent protest domestically while plotting terror attacks abroad.¹⁴ And Iran's naval capabilities potentially allow it to disrupt the passage of oil and gas through the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁵

The specter of an Iranian nuclear threat has heightened not only Israeli concerns¹⁶ but also those of U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf. Sunni-led Gulf regimes express concern about Iranian support for Arab Shia resistance groups and have long-standing fears about what they see as Tehran's hegemonic ambitions.¹⁷ Given Iranian support for proxies in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen,¹⁸ Gulf regimes have reason for concern. The possibility that Iran might be able to develop a nuclear bomb within a year has heightened these fears, since Iran and its proxies may be emboldened if it acquires nuclear weapons.¹⁹ In some

cases, though, Gulf states have painted legitimate domestic opposition groups – which happen to be predominantly Shia – as Iranian agents in order to delegitimize calls for reform.²⁰

Two contingencies involving Iran could increase the threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East. The first would be the nuclearization of the region and its destabilizing effects. Spurred on by the Iranian nuclear program, other countries – especially Saudi Arabia – could seek nuclear weapons, potentially resulting in a proliferation cascade in the region.²¹ U.S. and Israeli freedom of action could be constrained in a multipolar nuclear region. In addition, the lack of communication and understanding among the key players in the region could heighten the potential for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation to a nuclear crisis.²²

The second contingency could be an Israeli or U.S. military strike on Iran intended to retard the development of Iran's nuclear program. The second- and third-order effects of such a strike, while the subject of much speculation, could put U.S. interests in the region in jeopardy.²³ Iran, for instance, could launch missiles at a U.S. warship in the Persian Gulf and target U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, the Gulf or the Levant via terrorist attacks, prompting a U.S. response. Iran could leverage its relationships with Hezbollah and Palestinian militants in the Levant to conduct strikes on Israel – although all of these groups have their own domestic constraints, which may affect the degree to which they would act on behalf of Iran.²⁴ Such attacks, nonetheless, could provoke Israeli and even U.S. retaliation. In either case, conditions could escalate from even the smallest conflict into a broader regional war.

Iran poses the most immediate threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, but other factors will also present new opportunities and risks for U.S. interests in the region. Among these factors are the trajectories of three major states: Syria, Iraq and Egypt.

The Iranian Threat in Perspective

The prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran poses a considerable threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East and should be met with a strong and diligent response from the United States and its allies. Analysts, however, should not exaggerate the immediacy of Iran acquiring a bomb or the threat Iran poses to the physical and economic security of the United States. Many news reports and editorials have inflated the threat, by focusing primarily on how quickly Iran could attain a nuclear bomb or treating that outcome as a foregone conclusion.²⁵

In fact, Iran appears to be pursuing a “nuclear hedging” strategy that aims to develop the indigenous technical capability to produce nuclear weapons rapidly at some point should the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decide to do so.²⁶ According to U.S. intelligence agency leaders, at this point he has not.²⁷ Iran’s hedging strategy involves well-known efforts to master the nuclear fuel-cycle, clandestine and dual-use weapons-related research and the development of advanced ballistic missiles. Given the time it would take to produce fissile material and overcome the technical hurdles associated with weaponization, Iran probably has the capability to produce a crude testable nuclear device in about a year from when the supreme leader makes a decision to do so.²⁸

Fashioning a device that could be effectively delivered against

Iran’s adversaries would likely take longer. A nuclear “breakout” would require diversion of Iran’s low-enriched uranium stockpile and further enrichment to weapons-grade uranium at Natanz or Fordow (both declared facilities), which are monitored by the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency. Inspectors would likely detect the enrichment program – or Iran would have to eject the inspectors first. Since such brazen action risks triggering an even broader international coalition and stronger international response, including possible military action, Khamenei is unlikely to act until Iran has the capability to build several devices very quickly or to do so in secret – which could be years from now.²⁹ Khamenei might calculate that if Iran develops several devices quickly or clandestinely, it may increase the possibility of Iran having a “second strike” capability or an undetectable cache of nuclear weapons, which in turn could cause the international community to rethink what additional measures it may take against Iran.

The inflation of the Iranian threat extends far beyond the bomb, though, and articles and editorials have emphasized small Iranian naval vessels,³⁰ threats of an Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz,³¹ Iran’s awkward relations with al Qaeda,³² Iranian scouts conducting surveillance of New York City landmarks,³³ political rhetoric about retaliation³⁴ and general efforts to “bedevil the

West”³⁵ to bolster the perception that the threat from Iran is widespread and unstoppable. Some of these allegations merit legitimate concern, particularly as Iran’s growing asymmetric capabilities in the Persian Gulf³⁶ may raise the stakes for miscalculation and miscommunication between Iranian and U.S. naval assets. However, analysts and policymakers should keep a sense of perspective with regard to Iran’s ability to threaten the physical and economic security of the United States – as well as U.S. regional allies and partners.

As the United States maintains a sense of perspective with regard to the Iranian threat, policymakers must remain cognizant that its Israeli ally may have a different assessment. Iran, in the eyes of some Israelis, poses an immediate and existential threat to Israel. Nevertheless, an Israeli attack on Iran would be detrimental to both U.S. and Israeli interests. While military force should remain a last resort, only the United States, acting under the right circumstances, would be able to employ the use of force and manage the associated risks effectively.³⁷

SYRIA

Syria is in the midst of a civil war, and it is very uncertain what its ultimate direction will be. On the one hand, a new regime in Damascus could upend the regional balance of power in ways favorable to U.S. interests, removing Iran's key ally and cutting off a key supplier and partner to Hezbollah. A new regime that is more open to discussing peace options with Israel could revitalize the Arab-Israeli peace process, perhaps with Turkey's encouragement. A change in Damascus' leadership could also help lessen the recent resurgence of violence and perhaps even resolve the political stalemate in Lebanon. Within Syria itself, a change in regime could also bring less violence and repression and more freedom to the Syrian people.

On the other hand, continued civil war or even continued unrest could spread to or draw in other parts of the Levant, Iraq and the Persian Gulf, particularly along sectarian or tribal and familial lines.³⁸ The fate of Syria's substantial stockpile of chemical weapons is particularly concerning, as the current regime could lose control of this material, and it could end up in the hands of non-state actors who are willing to use it in Syria's internal crisis or to proliferate it elsewhere. The United States and regional partners have begun contingency planning for this threat.³⁹ A new regime in Damascus could be even more antagonistic toward Israel, increasing support for militant groups or contesting the disputed Golan Heights beyond mere rhetoric. There also is no guarantee that a new regime would not be as ruthless and oppressive as that of Bashar al-Asad.⁴⁰ At the moment, though, the Syrian opposition remains weak and fractured, and there is ample reason to believe the conflict will continue for many more months if not years.⁴¹

IRAQ

Syria's neighbor Iraq is also at a crossroads. It is unclear how this oil-rich, centrally-located state will orient its policies or what kind of government it will embrace. Iraq's strategic orientation – including

The 2011 Libya Intervention and Its Implications

The NATO intervention into Libya in March 2011 has been the only instance in which the United States has employed military force as a policy response to the Arab Spring. The United States did not have any vital interests at stake in Libya, but the convergence of four factors bolstered the case for U.S. military involvement. The first factor was Moammar Gadhafi's record of brutality and reliable indicators of his intent to massacre up to 700,000 Libyans in the rebel-held city of Benghazi – including his threat that “any Libyan ‘cockroaches’ who takes arms against Libya will be executed.” Mass atrocities seemed imminent.⁴² Second, the Obama administration had concerns that the Libyan uprising, taking place so soon after the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, might have a negative effect on the Arab Spring if it failed.⁴³ Third, the Obama administration had international and regional support for an intervention: The call for action by the Arab League, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, strong advocacy by European allies and participation in the military operation by Arab states provided international legitimacy for the mission. Fourth, although the time and level of force needed to complete the mission were underestimated, the international community had a viable military strategy working in cooperation with a credible Libyan opposition, which had managed to control the eastern half of the country as well as the city of Misrata.⁴⁴ Such factors have not fully converged in other cases, most notably Syria.

whether it aligns with the United States, the Persian Gulf states, Iran or none of these – will have significant geopolitical effects on the region, which will present opportunities and risks for U.S. interests. Iraq's geography, situated between the Arab states, Turkey and Iran, as well as its enormous oil resources, rising military capabilities and powerful sense of national pride suggest that it will re-emerge as an important actor.

Yet there is cause for concern about the direction in which Iraq is headed both domestically and internationally. Anti-democratic trends in Iraq, including the growth of corruption across ministries and government interference in anti-corruption cases, as well as further exacerbation of sectarian tensions, should worry U.S. policymakers and elevate the importance of reform.⁴⁵ In addition, the Iraqi civil war of 2005-2007 ended in a decisive victory for Shia Iraqi factions, but sectarian tensions remain. As Iraqi oil production increases, it will help diversify available sources in the global oil market, providing opportunities to help ease pressure on global demand for hydrocarbons. But Iraqi Arab-Kurd tensions and Kurdish separatist ambitions are hindering this process. Iraqi oil will also be susceptible to threats to the constricted access points of the Persian Gulf.⁴⁶

While the re-emergence of a strong Iraq could help check growing Iranian regional hegemony, failure of the United States to discourage the reassertion of autocratic rule in Iraq would discredit U.S. reform efforts elsewhere in the region. The United States retains some influence in Iraq. Even after the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq, the United States maintains key relationships at every political and military echelon, which it could use to exert pressure for constructive dialogue.

EGYPT

As Egypt experiments with democratic governance, it too will re-evaluate its role in the region. Egypt has been a bellwether of political and social change in the Arabic-speaking world. Home to 90 million people, Egypt has historically been the intellectual and political center of the Middle East.⁴⁷

Hanging over everything in Egypt is the fragile state of the country's economy. Egypt's foreign currency reserves fell each month after the revolution in February 2011, and gross domestic product growth fell from 5 percent per year to less than 2 percent in 2011.⁴⁸ It is projected at less than 1

percent this year.⁴⁹ The economic conditions that preceded the Egyptian revolution, which included soaring costs of living, would be exacerbated in the event of an Egyptian default or currency devaluation.

U.S. policymakers fear that too much pressure on the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and other elements of the military leadership could endanger access rights to the Suez Canal or the security of Israel.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, some actions of the SCAF, such as the arrest of Americans working with NGOs, have conflicted with U.S. interests and values. Other actions, such as delaying elections and disqualifying popular presidential candidates, have put the SCAF at odds with Egypt's newly empowered public.⁵¹ Though the recent parliamentary and presidential elections may diminish the influence of the Egyptian military and could elevate the role of Islamist rivals such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the SCAF's entrenched role in all aspects of the Egyptian state and economy will make it a political force for the foreseeable future. It will be one of the tasks of the newly elected government to assert civilian control over the country. A strong, democratic Egypt would be a powerful example for other countries in the region.⁵²

The fate of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel is what should most concern U.S. policymakers. Between 1948 and 1973, Egypt and Israel fought four major wars with geostrategic implications for the United States. The Camp David accords that brought peace between the two countries are a cornerstone of regional stability as well as a triumph of U.S. diplomacy. For the first time in more than 30 years, there is a real possibility of this agreement fracturing. While many viewed the Egyptian revolution with hope and admiration for the Egyptian protesters, Israelis viewed it with suspicion.⁵³ Although relations between the governments of Hosni Mubarak and Israel at times were just a cold peace, they allowed for significant

cooperation that served their mutual security. But the Israeli and Egyptian peoples never formed a bond, and the plight of the Palestinian people was never resolved. As a result, the peace treaty with Israel is highly unpopular among Egyptians. Indeed, last fall, rioters stormed and ransacked the Israeli Embassy in Cairo.⁵⁴ Were it not for the eventual intervention of both Egyptian security forces and the U.S. Embassy, Israeli diplomats might have been wounded or killed.

U.S. policymakers should be concerned by the potential for further tensions between Israel and a new Egyptian government as it attempts to be more responsive to an Egyptian public that is generally hostile toward Israel.⁵⁵ Following an April 2012 rocket attack launched by militants in the Sinai into the Israeli resort city of Eilat, Israelis increasingly worry about their suddenly dangerous southern border, which abuts both the Gaza Strip and the semiautonomous Sinai Peninsula.⁵⁶ A few weeks before the riot at the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, Israeli soldiers killed several Egyptian border guards after an attack in Israel by Palestinian militants who had infiltrated across the border.⁵⁷ Egyptians were predictably enraged. Egypt watchers now envision a scenario in which Israel could conduct military operations in the Sinai against militants.⁵⁸ The strategic ill effects of an Israeli military incursion into the Sinai would almost certainly outweigh whatever tactical successes Israel might achieve.⁵⁹

Transformative Arab Domestic Politics

Four trends are reshaping Arab politics: Continuing political instability, the increasing relevance of political Islam, newly empowered Arab publics and severe economic hurdles all test the abilities of U.S. diplomats and defense officials. All of these developments will affect U.S. interests.

Political instability in the Middle East is likely to be widespread and severe for the foreseeable future. In the past 18 months, regimes in Tunisia, Egypt,

Libya and Yemen have fallen, while violent and nonviolent uprisings continue to shake Syria and Bahrain. The challenges facing each of these states are immense. Numerous other regimes, including those in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, have experienced popular protests. Jordan, a key ally of the United States and Israel, seems primed for greater political instability in 2012, having had three different prime ministers in less than a year and a half.⁶⁰ The rotation of prime ministers is symptomatic of the king's inability to date to strike a balance between preserving his own power and promoting reform.

The new revolutionary states of the region face manifold difficulties, but the challenges vary from country to country. In some states, such as in Egypt and Tunisia, the crux of the problem going forward lies in the return of electoral politics and the reform of state institutions.⁶¹ In Libya, meanwhile, where Gadhafi pointedly did not create durable institutions, the challenge lies in state formation.⁶² Problems facing Yemen go far beyond political transition and extend to long-term demographic challenges, given that 45 percent of its population is under age 15, and foreboding environmental disasters such as its rapidly depleting water resources.⁶³ Yemen will likely become even more ungovernable as its leaders attempt to do more with less, which will further throw into doubt Yemen's ability to be a partner in U.S. counterterrorism efforts.⁶⁴ Finally, political scientists remind us that anocracies – governments that are neither wholly democratic nor autocratic – are the least stable regime type and the most likely to descend back into civil conflict.⁶⁵ As anocracies spread across the Middle East, policymakers should reflect on this finding.

The second trend is that the forces of political Islam will continue to be ascendant across the region.⁶⁶ In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist parties are dominant in recently elected parliaments. In Libya and Syria as well, some militias active in resisting

the Gadhafi and Asad regimes are religiously motivated. And in Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, Islamist political parties are a highly visible feature of the political landscape.⁶⁷ This trend shows no sign of reversing. Indeed, in the view of some experts, “Islamist movements are today the most dynamic political force across the Arab world – and they may well be for the next decade or longer.”⁶⁸ Thus, the protection of U.S. interests requires the United States to interact with parties and leaders that only a few years ago were dismissed as radicals. However, policymakers are still too wary of engaging political and opinion leaders across the full ideological spectrum.

The protection of U.S. interests requires the United States to interact with parties and leaders that only a few years ago were dismissed as radicals.

The third trend concerns empowered Arab peoples. A new Arab public sphere has been developing in the Middle East since at least the mid-1990s. While the region remains divided by state boundaries, a shared political dialogue – enabled by diverse media, ranging from Al Jazeera to Twitter – has emerged in which the people of the region have the freedom to voice their desires and frustrations in ways they could not two decades ago.⁶⁹ Much of this sentiment comes from Arab youth, for whom the gap between their aspirations and the often grim realities of their lives has widened. The monopoly over information once enjoyed by regimes has been lost to new technologies and media. No longer can ministries of information shape what

publics know and do not know about the world and their condition relative to other peoples. It is one of the key factors why, for example, Asad has not been able to replicate his father’s “Hama rules” of brutal repression. It took months for Western journalists and human rights groups to get even some information out on the Hama massacre of 1982.⁷⁰ Today, by contrast, massacres are broadcast over camera phones, sparking immediate public debate – including in the United States – about how leaders should respond to the conflict.

The fourth trend is that economic challenges have and will continue to reinforce political instability. The alarming socioeconomic weaknesses identified a decade ago in the “Arab Human Development Report” are still present in most cases and even worse in others.⁷¹ The “ominous dynamics of marginalization” – by which inequality widens, unemployment deepens, corruption runs rampant, innovation lags and women are denied basic rights and meaningful economic participation – continue.⁷²

Political instability disrupts regional economies further. In Tunisia, despite successful elections, foreign direct investment dropped 20 percent in the 12 months after the uprising. Eighty companies left the country, tourism declined by 50 percent and only the slightest dent has been made in the 20 percent unemployment rate for college graduates.⁷³ In Morocco, a group called Unemployed Graduates has formed, reflecting an unemployment rate among college graduates that is almost double the national one.⁷⁴ In Bahrain, the Sunni-Shia political divide has exacerbated the Sunni-Shia economic divide.⁷⁵ In Saudi Arabia and other OPEC monarchies, oil earnings have financed subsidies to buy political quiescence from the public in the short term. Some projections, however, question the fiscal sustainability of this strategy, with budget deficits possible as early as 2014 and political unrest a real possibility if

Saudi Arabia cannot continue to buy the consent of the governed.⁷⁶ Such economic pressures are likely to contribute to greater political instability, further complicating the strategic context in which U.S. policy operates.

Terrorism

Al Qaeda has ceased to be a strategic player in the Middle East, calling into question the prioritization of the U.S. counterterrorism interests relative to its other interests in the region.⁷⁷ Whereas al Qaeda might once have been described as a coherent, centralized organization, it is today more decentralized and franchised – with most franchises performing quite poorly.⁷⁸ In the year since the killing of Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda has struggled to carry out operations worldwide,⁷⁹ although threats to the United States emanating from al Qaeda's franchise in Yemen, including the recently disrupted plot to detonate a bomb aboard a commercial airplane,⁸⁰ have been serious.

Several factors have contributed to al Qaeda's decline.

First, although opportunities for al Qaeda to resurge in Yemen and Syria remain, the organization has suffered considerable setbacks across the Middle East. An insurgency against U.S. forces and the new Iraqi government from 2003 to 2010 failed. By 2007, al Qaeda's allies in Iraq had turned against it, and U.S. and Iraqi troops combined to devastate the organization's leadership in Iraq. An insurgency against the government in Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2005 also failed. As Thomas Hegghammer recounts, al Qaeda insurgents attempting to overthrow the regime in Saudi Arabia stuck out like the foreigners they had become while in exile in Pakistan and elsewhere.⁸¹ The way in which al Qaeda fought these campaigns carried an enormous cost: The Arabic-speaking public might have cheered attacks on U.S. military installations, but attacks on Jordanian wedding parties and Iraqi markets proved highly unpopular.⁸²

Second, the U.S. government has carried out a very intense and mostly successful campaign against al Qaeda's leadership in not just the Arabic-speaking world but especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As of July 2011, U.S. drone strikes had killed more than 1,000 militants in Pakistan's tribal regions.⁸³ Bin Laden worried enough about the safety of his organization and its fellow travelers in the tribal areas of Pakistan to contemplate evacuating the supposed "safe haven."⁸⁴ The subsequent death of bin Laden himself, while satisfying to the American people, overshadows the way in which U.S. intelligence agencies and special operations forces (SOF) degraded the rest of the organization.⁸⁵

Third and finally, the Arab Spring, in which Islamist parties have come to power through largely peaceable means, has been a disaster for al Qaeda. The revolutions in Tunisia and especially Egypt have discredited the al Qaeda narrative – that armed insurrection and coercive violence were the keys to political and social change.⁸⁶

Opportunities for al Qaeda and risks for the United States abound nonetheless. Al Qaeda – or at least one of its franchises – continues to have success in Yemen and, as demonstrated by the May 2012 plot to destroy a commercial airplane, remains intent on striking the United States.⁸⁷ A successful attack on the United States that originated in Yemen would likely result in a dramatic increase in U.S. drone attacks to eliminate the offenders in Yemen and a diversion of U.S. policy and intelligence resources to Yemen – away from other regional priorities. In an effort to stamp out the immediate threat, Washington would risk diverting its attention from festering problems, such as in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, where it may have more at stake in the long term.

The civil war in Syria also presents opportunities for militant Sunni Islamist groups to fill the void and harness Sunni dissatisfaction with the lack

of coherence among Syria's political opposition elements. The presence of chemical and biological weapons in Syria, which could fall into the hands of religiously motivated rebel groups resident in Syria, should worry the United States, as should the news of the alleged release of al Qaeda ideologue Abu Mus'ab al Suri from a Syrian prison.⁸⁸ The precedent for militants from Syria wreaking havoc in the region was set five years ago when Shaker al Absi was either released or escaped from a Syrian prison. In summer 2007, his group, Fatah al-Islam, carried out pitched battles with Lebanon's security forces in and around the Nahr al Bared refugee camp outside Tripoli, displacing tens of thousands in the worst political violence in Lebanon since the 2006 war. A strategist like al Suri, meanwhile, could help fill the leadership void left in the wake of bin Laden's death.

U.S.-Israel Relations and Israeli-Palestinian Peace

Israel remains a vital ally of the United States. The United States and Israel share crucial regional security interests, such as preventing Iranian aggression and coercion and combating transnational terrorist networks.⁸⁹ Gains from military and intelligence cooperation run in both directions: Joint exercises, for example, allowed the United States to learn from Israeli experience in urban warfare and counterterrorism long before the challenges of Iraq and Afghanistan.⁹⁰ The Israel Defense Forces, meanwhile, use tactics, techniques and procedures developed by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States and Israel share key Arab partners, including Jordan, with which Israel developed significant military, diplomatic and economic cooperation after the 1994 peace treaty. Underlying the U.S.-Israeli relationship is the deep affinity of two democracies with shared values and vibrant societies with close relations among its peoples and extensive cooperation between scientific, educational and business

communities. While the Holocaust may fade in memory to some, the U.S. commitment to the state of Israel borne out of that genocide has not.

Still, U.S.-Israeli tensions have been running high due to underlying differences in threat perceptions and priorities – particularly regarding Iran and the peace process.⁹¹ This is not the first time there have been tensions in the relationship.⁹² These tensions may recede, but they are unlikely to ebb completely. Today's tensions are broader and deeper, reflecting not just the much-mentioned lack of chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu but also sharp differences in how they view the region.

A significant number of Israelis increasingly doubt that the United States understands the gravity of the threats their country faces, while concerns are raised increasingly in the United States about the extent to which support for Israel serves American interests.⁹³ These differences have been particularly acute over the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In the last few years the Israeli leadership has resisted concessions toward the Palestinian leadership and fears, above all, the threat posed by Iran and its nuclear program.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the Palestinians have insisted on a settlement freeze as a precondition for talks, following the Obama administration's assertion that a freeze should be a precondition. While continuing to work closely with Israel, Obama administration officials have spoken of the toll the failure to make progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace takes on U.S. interests. "Enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests" in the region, GEN David Petraeus, then head of U.S. Central Command, stated in his March 2010 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples [in the region]." The same month, in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee with Netanyahu at her side, Secretary of State

Hillary Rodham Clinton stressed not only how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was undermining U.S. interests by strengthening Islamist extremists but also how “world leaders, even from countries far from the Middle East, constantly bring up the issue.”⁹⁵ Obama made similar points in his May 2011 speech, that “the conflict between Israelis and Arabs has cast a shadow over the region,” and with this conflict has come a “larger cost ... as it impedes partnerships that could bring greater security and prosperity and empowerment to ordinary people.”⁹⁶ While there have been fewer public statements of this nature recently, such concerns remain. With the Kadima party now part of the governing coalition and its leader, Shaul Mofaz, as vice prime minister, Netanyahu may be potentially capable of taking a more conciliatory position in dealings with the Palestinians and over settlements, although it is not yet clear whether he intends to do so.⁹⁷

The current Israeli leadership is also wary of the Arab Spring. Netanyahu’s office expressed its unease on Twitter, bluntly writing, “The Middle East is going through an Islamist revolution which in its core is hostile to Israel.”⁹⁸ In this environment, Israel is very concerned by the sale of U.S. weapons systems to its Arab neighbors, even though these sales are focused largely on strengthening partner capabilities to counter Iran.⁹⁹

Energy Security

Preserving global access to energy resources in the Persian Gulf remains a U.S. national interest. The rationale behind this assessment, though, is shifting. Whereas past oil crises were largely based on Middle East instability causing fear and uncertainty about supply, today there is also increased demand produced by global economic growth. When the two pressures combine, as they have in recent months, the spike can be sharp.¹⁰⁰ But even in the event of regional stability, demand-side pressure could conceivably result in increases in oil prices. The International Energy Agency projects growth

in world oil demand will overwhelmingly come from non-Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries for the next five years, and almost certainly longer.¹⁰¹ With the continuing instability in the Middle East and increased global demand, oil markets will continue to be vulnerable to fluctuating and rising prices at least as much as in the past, and perhaps more so.¹⁰²

U.S. dependence on foreign oil, particularly Persian Gulf oil, is declining, as the United States is gaining assured access to oil resources elsewhere. The United States now imports less foreign oil as a percentage of total imports and less than half the amount it consumes on an annual basis.¹⁰³ In projections for the next 25 years, net oil imports as a share of total U.S. liquid fuels consumed drop from 49 percent in 2010 to 36 percent in 2035.¹⁰⁴ A combination of increased oil and natural gas production, increased development of renewable sources and greater energy efficiency in automobiles, buildings, power plants and homes have combined to reduce U.S. vulnerability to oil supply disruptions.

Reduced vulnerability does not entirely insulate the United States from market fluctuations; shocks still hurt, even if overall U.S. dependence on oil is decreasing. Supply disruptions can have far-reaching effects. Oil prices are set by global markets and affect not only the price of gasoline, but also the prices of commodities that require fuel for transportation. Increases in oil costs can lead to fluctuations in fertilizer supply that particularly affect developing nations with vulnerable agricultural sectors.¹⁰⁵ In addition, financial markets react quickly and intensely to any energy sector disturbances. Increased oil prices can spur central banks to raise interest rates in an attempt to stave off or check inflation.¹⁰⁶ The United States thus has an interest in the security of hydrocarbon resources in the Middle East that goes beyond the direct needs of U.S. consumers.

V. STRATEGIC ADAPTATION: PRIORITIES AND TRENDS

The Middle East is changing, and the United States needs a new strategy to protect its interests. The strategy we propose is one of strategic adaptation. While this entails recalibrating some U.S. commitments to the region, it is more about better matching ways and means to fit the new strategic context. There are elements of continuity with existing U.S. policy and activities in the region, but we emphasize changes to the strategic environment and how those changes should affect U.S. policy.

Prioritization is a crucial component of successful strategies. In this section, we outline three things the United States must do in the near term to head off the more immediate threats to U.S. interests, and three things the United States must do *concurrently* to ensure U.S. interests are consistent with the shifting strategic context. We chose our priorities based on U.S. interests as well as our analysis in the preceding sections. The flexibility required to address near-term and long-term horizons simultaneously is what characterizes our strategy of adaptation. The United States must be prepared both to address crises in the region and to shape regional dynamics going forward.

Near-Term Priorities

IRAN

The United States should continue its “dual track” strategy of severe sanctions plus diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷ The optimal outcome remains a negotiated resolution that would provide assurances against weaponization efforts and sufficient transparency to verify those assurances. Such a resolution should also ensure the reinforcement of the global nonproliferation regime. The most important goal should be to prevent Iran from developing actual nuclear weapons. If Iran verifiably ends its weaponization work, operates strictly and transparently within the confines of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),

and agrees to sufficient technical safeguards and intrusive inspections to detect and deter cheating, these steps would be sufficient to address the greatest dangers emanating from Iran’s program, even if some limited domestic enrichment is permitted.¹⁰⁸

The Obama administration’s approach is rightly aimed at preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.¹⁰⁹ Reaching a diplomatic settlement remains the most attractive policy since, short of invading and occupying Iran to disestablish its program, the only sustainable preventive solution is one in which the Iranians choose to step back from the nuclear brink.¹¹⁰ From 2006 to 2008, the Bush administration helped orchestrate a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at placing multilateral economic sanctions on Tehran to encourage it to live up to its international obligations under the NPT.¹¹¹ The Obama administration built on this approach through its initial engagement efforts and subsequent efforts to forge an international consensus to impose much tougher pressure measures. Unprecedented financial and energy sanctions appear to be affecting Iranian calculations – as evidenced by the regime’s increasing willingness to negotiate over its nuclear program.¹¹²

Obama has made it clear that an Iranian nuclear weapon is “unacceptable,” that all options – including military force – remain on the table to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and that the administration does not endorse a policy of nuclear containment. At the same time, Obama has also stated that he prefers a peaceful solution, and that there remains a window of opportunity to take advantage of the unprecedented pressure now exerted on Iran to reach a lasting diplomatic settlement.¹¹³

The latest tightening of sanctions will not be in place until summer 2012. Iran will not feel the full effects until several months afterward. The Iranian regime appears highly committed to a nuclear hedging strategy, but the costs, including

both economic costs and the background threat of military action, may be reaching the point where Iran's leadership could be willing to compromise.¹¹⁴ Sanctions should continue to be paced with the negotiations, tightened to the extent further pressure is needed and loosened as progress in the negotiations may warrant.

Adopting a policy of nuclear deterrence and containment is not preferable and should only be considered as a fallback position if all other preventive efforts fail.

As a prudent step, the United States should preposition military assets in the Persian Gulf and surrounding region based on the minimum requirements for an Iran contingency.¹¹⁵ Even given the considerable stakes involved in regional contingencies versus Iran discussed earlier, the Iran threat should be kept in perspective. As discussed earlier, credible estimates of Iran's nuclear progress indicate that time still remains for diplomacy, backed by severe sanctions, to work.¹¹⁶

Though a nuclear-armed Iran may not be as imminent a threat as some envision, it would nevertheless pose a significant challenge to U.S. interests and increase the prospects for regional conflict. Therefore, preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, rather than adopting a policy of nuclear deterrence and containment, should remain the priority.

If preventive efforts fail, the United States could potentially work alongside Israel and other regional

states to manage and mitigate many of the risks associated with a nuclear-armed Iran.¹¹⁷ Among the possible options for deterring and containing a nuclear-armed Iran, the United States could:

- Adjust nuclear declaratory policy to communicate clear red lines to Iran and thereby increase the likelihood of successful deterrence.
- Provide extended deterrence guarantees and additional security assistance, and re-posture forwardly deployed forces to dissuade Iranian aggression and reassure anxious allies.
- Bolster U.S. and partner early warning systems, integrated air and ballistic missile defenses, and capabilities to detect and defend against terrorist attacks.
- Enhance diplomatic, intelligence, military and economic efforts to disrupt Iranian covert operations and proxy activities.
- Help establish mechanisms for direct Israeli-Iranian-U.S. dialogue, crisis communications and arms control.
- Encourage Israel and Iran to adopt mutual "no first use" pledges and technical safety measures to reduce the risks of accidental escalation.¹¹⁸

While a viable deterrence and containment strategy is conceivable in theory, in practice it would be a very complex undertaking. Containing Iranian-backed terrorism and militancy is already difficult and would likely become more so if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. Moreover, during the initial period after Iran developed nuclear weapons, growing Iranian assertiveness would likely collide with acute Israeli anxieties and a mutual sense of vulnerability, making the stability of any deterrence and containment arrangement very fragile – and the cost of failure would be very high. As such, adopting a policy of nuclear deterrence and containment is not preferable and should only be considered as a fallback position if all other preventive efforts fail.

ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS

The United States maintains a strong interest in the security of Israel and further progress toward Arab-Israeli peace.¹¹⁹ As the United States was uniquely well-positioned to broker the original Camp David Treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1978, the United States is well-positioned to prevent a rupture in the peace accords. Despite a dispute over U.S.-funded NGOs in Egypt this past winter, the United States enjoys close relations with the governments of both Egypt and Israel and has the trust of the military establishments in both countries.¹²⁰ U.S. diplomats as well as members of Congress and the Obama administration have also spent much time in the past year establishing relations with Egypt's new Islamist power brokers.¹²¹

The United States can do two things to preserve the peace. First, the United States can work through its embassies in both countries to head off any errors of misperception that might cause leaders in both countries to do something rash. Israel's leadership does not trust or know Egypt's new civilian leaders and may interpret violence in the Sinai or Gaza as taking place with the blessing of these leaders. Egypt's new civilian leaders, meanwhile, do not trust or know Israel's leadership.¹²² The United States should convene and facilitate meetings between political and military actors from both countries and be prepared to conduct shuttle diplomacy, or facilitate a dialogue between both sides, to de-escalate tensions if a crisis emerges. The two countries are bound to disagree on issues related to the rights of the Palestinians, but the United States should work through diplomatic channels to ensure that violence in the Sinai – which has been driven by a variety of social, political and economic factors largely unrelated to either Israel or the cause of the Palestinians – does not cause interstate conflict.

Second, the United States should underscore to both of its allies the high strategic costs of conflict. The United States should remind its Israeli friends

of the long-term consequences of Israeli intervention in southern Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 and how initially limited military operations created more problems – such as the creation of hard-line Lebanese resistance groups – than they solved. The United States should also make clear to Egypt's military and civilian leaderships that U.S. military and economic aid to Egypt – and U.S. advocacy for Egypt in international financial institutions – depends on Egypt's maintaining its peace with the other principal U.S. ally in the region.

ADDRESSING THREATS FROM SYRIA AND YEMEN

The United States faces near-term security threats in both Syria and Yemen, which are each in a state of civil war. While Syria is in the early stages of a civil war, Yemen faces persistent threats to its government from terrorist groups and other domestic insurrections.

In Syria, where the U.N. estimates that more than 9,000 civilians have been killed in the government's yearlong assault on protesters opposed to al-Asad, there is little reason to expect a swift resolution to the conflict.¹²³ For the moment, Syrian regime forces enjoy a tremendous advantage in terms of both manpower and equipment, and the regime has no reason yet to think it will lose.¹²⁴ The Syrian Alawi minority group – which fears the loss of its political and economic power – has strong incentives to act as a spoiler to any potential political settlement.¹²⁵

The United States should pursue a policy of “forceful diplomacy” to press for a resolution to the conflict, promoting greater freedom and justice for the Syrian people without becoming mired in Syria's civil war. Working with the U.N. Security Council and the Friends of Syria coalition, as well as through Washington's own initiatives, such a policy would continue to publicize regime atrocities, attempt to establish coherence and inclusion in the Syrian opposition (including providing non-lethal assistance) and exert international pressure

and sanctions on regime officials to promote a political transition negotiated between the Syrian opposition and government.¹²⁶ Efforts should continue to find the right mix of negotiation and pressure to get Russia to reduce its support for the Asad regime and especially stop vetoing more concerted Security Council action. While military contingencies should be prepared, in the absence of a more cohesive Syrian opposition, an international mandate and a viable strategy, the United States should not take military action. Under current conditions, military intervention in Syria “would alter but not end the dynamics of a long conflict, embroiling the United States directly in a protracted and bloody insurgency and civil war.”¹²⁷

However, as the United States works to facilitate a transition, it must also recognize the limitations of its leverage over Syrian actors, prepare for the likely contingency of a long conflict in Syria and work to mitigate the effects of that war on U.S. interests. This means containing the conflict and discouraging human rights abuses while seeking to resolve the conflict. To contain the conflict, the United States should counter efforts by other states, including those in the Friends of Syria coalition, to arm Syrian opposition surrogates with advanced weaponry or otherwise exploit the situation in ways that serve their own sectarian or narrow national interests.

The United States should worry about two particular consequences of the conflict in Syria: terrorism and the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons. The 2007 violence between Lebanese security forces and the Fatah al-Islam terrorist group, led by a militant released by Syrian authorities and resulting in the displacement of nearly 30,000 Palestinian refugees, is a harbinger of the kind of violence that might spill over from Syria.¹²⁸ To mitigate the outbreak of limited, terrorist-led sectarian violence in Lebanon and other surrounding countries, the United States should provide security assistance and intelligence support to the

security services of Syria’s neighbors – as it did in 2007 with arms and equipment in addition to intelligence support.¹²⁹ The United States has excellent relationships with the security services of each neighboring country, which will serve as a valuable asset in the event of a contingency.¹³⁰

The spread of chemical or biological weapons is more difficult to mitigate. None of Syria’s neighbors has an interest in such weapons crossing their borders. But the ease with which people and weapons have been smuggled across international borders during the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq shows how porous the Syrian borders with Iraq and Lebanon can be.¹³¹ Both Lebanon and Iraq have maintained relationships with the Asad regime, and each country should lobby the regime to safeguard its chemical and biological weapons stockpiles. The United States must work with the security services of each neighboring country, meanwhile, to develop plans to halt the movement of such weapons outside of Syria.

In Yemen, al Qaeda affiliates have established a safe haven and begun to provide services and governance despite warnings from al Qaeda’s senior leadership not to attempt to hold territory and establish an emirate.¹³² Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has proved persistent in its efforts to attack the United States; since its formation in January 2009, it has repeatedly attempted to detonate bombs aboard U.S.-bound airplanes and has encouraged acts of terrorism in both Yemen and the United States. In recent months, AQAP has been bolstered by the success of its political front organization, Ansar al Sharia (the Partisans of Islamic Law), which appears to operate parallel to AQAP and is now waging a domestic insurgency campaign against the Yemeni government.¹³³

The U.S. strategy toward Yemen has been heavily weighted toward counterterrorism. This has included training for counterterrorism units within the Yemeni military and an expanded

program of drone strikes against AQAP targets. Though this strategy has succeeded in killing several AQAP officials, including the propagandist Anwar al Aulaqi and Fahd al-Quso, who is believed to be responsible for bombing the *USS Cole* in 2000, it has failed to check AQAP's growth.¹³⁴ AQAP's estimated strength has more than tripled since 2009, and its tactics have shifted such that AQAP has begun holding territory in Yemen's rural south.¹³⁵ Despite some short-term successes, U.S. initiatives have proved inadequate in addressing the drivers of conflict.¹³⁶

A more comprehensive strategy would place greater emphasis on political reform and economic development to address the grievances on which AQAP has capitalized in mobilizing support.¹³⁷ Paradoxically, the United States should be more successful doing this in Yemen, where it expends relatively few resources, than it was in Afghanistan and Iraq, where a larger investment of resources made host nation governments complacent.¹³⁸ The United States should pursue this strategy even if it stresses the U.S. relationship with the new Yemeni government in the near term. In regions at the periphery of the Yemeni government's control, AQAP and Ansar al Sharia have both capitalized on the lack of political representation and government services in certain provinces. Using leverage gained from military assistance, the United States should push for a more inclusive system that better represents and accommodates traditionally under-represented populations in order to counter the influence of these terrorist groups.¹³⁹

The United States should keep the threat posed by domestic-focused extremists in Yemen in perspective. Though frequently conflated with AQAP, these actors do not present an existential threat to the United States and have a limited ability to project power beyond Yemen.¹⁴⁰ The United States should not conduct expansive airstrikes against an organization that has conducted itself much like one of Yemen's many other local insurgencies – and that

is now so well entrenched in certain communities that airstrikes with minimal collateral damage are almost impossible. To do so would risk radicalizing more Yemenis and alienating the general population at a time when the government is becoming increasingly accountable to its people.

The United States should press forward with the arduous process of restructuring Yemen's military in accordance with the transition agreement that led Saleh to step down from power. This process, which has already begun, will include training programs, changes in command to break the monopoly of power maintained by the Saleh family and what will likely be a long-term process of making the military accountable to civilian authorities in the government.¹⁴¹ This restructuring is a prerequisite to adequately confronting AQAP. For the past 18 months, the Yemeni government has kept its U.S.-trained and -equipped counterterrorism forces concentrated in Sanaa, while less-prepared Yemeni troops have taken the fight to AQAP and Ansar al Sharia.¹⁴² Until more capable military forces can be deployed to AQAP-controlled regions, military offensives with high casualties will prove as much a liability for their media value to AQAP as they will be an asset to U.S. and Yemeni counterterrorism objectives. Finally, the United States should help address the long-term economic pressures on Yemen by assisting in the international efforts to redevelop the port of Aden, which has the potential to alleviate unemployment in Yemen's restive south.¹⁴³ These are interests the United States shares with the Yemeni government, which is also threatened by AQAP and recognizes the need for governmental and economic reforms, but the United States may need to apply pressure to keep the government focused on a broad, comprehensive approach to meet the challenges Yemen faces.

Long-Term Trends

While the United States must focus its attention and resources on the short-term priorities discussed above, it should simultaneously adapt its

regional policies to the following long-term trends: the return of politics to the Arab world, reduced U.S. dependency on the Persian Gulf and tensions in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Classifying these developments as long-term trends does not mean that they should be ignored until a later point. Rather, U.S. policies that seek to harness the potential and mitigate the risks of these long-term trends will require sustained engagement and pressure and will take time to bear fruit. By adapting its policies with these trends in mind, Washington may be able to reduce U.S. vulnerability and achieve a more enduring level of stability in the region.

THE RETURN OF POLITICS TO THE ARAB WORLD

When the Arab Spring first swept through the region, the dilemma for U.S. policymakers was clear: The United States was over-invested in the most undemocratic regimes in the Arabic-speaking world. Despite that, the Arab Spring has been more anti-regime than anti-American. While continuing to recognize that these uprisings are not about the United States,¹⁴⁴ Washington should focus more on preventing anti-U.S. regimes from emerging rather than propping up pro-U.S. ones. Going forward, it will continue to be appropriate for the United States to embrace regional stability as an end. But U.S. policymakers must understand that realizing the democratic aspirations of the Arab peoples is the only sustainable pathway toward true stability.

Accordingly, the United States should adapt in four key ways:

1. Engage Arab Publics, Not Just Regimes

The days when U.S. diplomats and military officials could discreetly decide the terms of U.S. activities in the Middle East with a handful of Arab monarchs and generals are over. In the age of WikiLeaks and social media, the details and consequences of U.S. policy are more transparent and more widely discussed than ever before. In addition, if the Arab Spring fulfills its promise, the

regimes of the Middle East will necessarily be more responsive to the public weal. It is not enough, then, to sell a handful of regime officials on a U.S. policy or initiative. The United States must make the Middle East an exemplar of what Anne-Marie Slaughter calls “a pivot to the people ... engaging with Egypt’s bloggers as well as with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces” and “convening young entrepreneurs in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco and connecting them to funding and mentoring.”¹⁴⁵ U.S. officials must now convince a wider range of opinion leaders and substantial segments of Arab publics that working with the United States is in the interests of their respective countries. The United States should broaden its approach to interact directly, and through a variety of media, with a wide range of civil society organizations, religious groups, women’s organizations, universities and professional groups, among others. This is where the competition of ideas plays out and where new technologies hold the potential to empower peoples.

The U.S. objective in engaging Arab publics should be twofold. First, the United States should seek to establish relationships with emerging power brokers. Second, the United States should convey that it will support calls for political, economic and security reform that meet the needs and aspirations of Arab publics, while reinforcing this objective in private consultations with regime officials.

Important shifts toward this broader societal engagement have already been initiated since the onset of the Arab Spring, and in some aspects even before. The Middle East has been a significant focus of the “21st Century Statecraft” stressed in the State Department’s Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review and manifested in high-level commitment to women’s issues, global youth, civil society and emerging democracies, and global partnerships.¹⁴⁶ These and other public engagement efforts, including interviews with major television networks and town hall-style meetings, should be

incorporated into the normal duties and responsibilities of embassies and consulates. Ambassadors in Egypt and Jordan, for example, should consider themselves emissaries to not only the governments but to the people on the street. They should listen and feed the insights they gather back into U.S. policy as appropriate.

Social media and “e-diplomacy” are being used more extensively by the State Department as well as by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Pentagon and other official channels.¹⁴⁷ Of particular note is how U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford has been able to engage with Syrians and respond to charges from Asad regime loyalists through an active Facebook page that he has maintained despite the closure of the U.S. Embassy in Damascus.¹⁴⁸

Secretary Clinton has brought her own prestige and skills to town hall meetings, civil society outreach, women’s initiatives and other efforts to engage with Arab publics. While these rarely resolve policy differences and at times encounter strong criticisms of U.S. policy, they convey a commitment to engage with Arab publics. The next secretary of state should build on such initiatives, adapting and innovating as appropriate.

The United States should be realistic about the extent to which it, as a government, can engage Arab publics given the broad spectrum of actors involved, the pace and complexity of diffuse social media and network communications, and the legacy of Arab public suspicion of U.S. motives in the Middle East. But through public-private partnerships and direct engagement is between private actors, the United States should encourage U.S. universities and businesses to establish centers and branch offices to engage with publics and businesses in the Middle East. For the most part, these universities and businesses see such initiatives as being in their own best interests. Already, U.S. universities, with the incentive of generous

This may be the hardest but most crucial element to change in the U.S. approach: understanding the mindsets of Arab publics to better inform U.S. policy and communicate U.S. objectives going forward.

partnership funding, have been establishing satellite campuses and exchange programs with Persian Gulf states since the 1990s.

Whatever the techniques, the value of public engagement depends on the communication flow being two-way – not just getting the U.S. message out but also, indeed especially, taking in what Arab publics are thinking and perceiving, and what their aspirations are. This may be the hardest but most crucial element to change in the U.S. approach: understanding the mindsets of Arab publics to better inform U.S. policy and communicate U.S. objectives going forward. It is an approach that will not only make U.S. efforts more effective but also convey a level of respect to newly empowered publics.

2. Pursue a Differentiated Strategy Toward Political Islam

As the United States engages with Arab publics more broadly, it must adapt its policies to pursue a more differentiated approach to political Islam. Political Islam is neither inherently incompatible with democracy nor automatically antagonistic toward the United States. Manifestations of political Islam differ from state to state within the region, and the United States must be sensitive toward national differentiations in terms of the goals, strategies, visions and leadership of the respective political Islamist parties and movements.¹⁴⁹ Policies need to be tailored to oppose those individuals and groups inimical to U.S.

values and threatening U.S. interests, while remaining open to those individuals and groups with which coexistence and cooperation may be possible even though differences exist. Unless an Islamist group stands in explicit and inflexible opposition to a vital U.S. interest in the region – as Hezbollah does with regard to Israeli security, for example – the United States should be prepared to engage diplomatically without preconditions. In both Tunisia and Egypt, working with moderate Islamist parties might even help those parties marginalize their more extreme Salafi political rivals.¹⁵⁰

The objective should be more to influence the behavior of Islamist groups than to reject the role of political Islamist actors outright. The U.S. capacity for influence amid broader and deeper political dynamics is inherently limited, and trying to alter legitimate political movements will only limit that influence further. Some forces, such as emerging Salafi groups, may push toward fundamentalism. But pressures to produce socioeconomic gains and maintain a broad coalition, including their own younger generation, can provide moderating forces that U.S. policy can reinforce. This accurately describes the situation in Tunisia, for example. The United States should quietly yet firmly support the Ennahda-led government in its efforts to counter the Salafis on issues such as the extent of *sharia* law. This policy, though not all secularists approve of it, has viable prospects for striking a balance between the natural U.S. preference for liberalism and political realities on the ground.¹⁵¹

In opening a dialogue with political Islamist parties, the United States will have to judge parties' actions versus their rhetoric (with particular regard to political and economic reform and Israel). The United States will also have to determine to what extent parties' rhetoric should be taken seriously – or to what extent the United States can afford to tolerate such rhetoric without comment or with only limited response. In the short term, engagement with these parties risks opening rifts

in U.S. relations with Israel, as well as with current Arab regimes resistant to reform or fearful of the emergence of these parties, since many of these regimes would prefer the United States not acknowledge democratic rivals to the established order. However, political Islam is a reality in the Arab political landscape and requires the United States to manage this risk if it wants to build relationships with emerging power brokers and secure its interests in the region over the long term.

In the case of Egypt, the United States should be open to working with the MB and its political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), to the extent that their actions remain consistent with a free and fair political process, its policies in power are not heavily repressive and its conduct adheres to the Camp David accords. Recent engagement efforts with the MB in Washington and Cairo are steps in the right direction.¹⁵² While raising issues as U.S. interests and values warrant, and in particular being clear on red lines beyond which U.S. policy would change, efforts to engage with the MB and FJP should continue in order to develop greater understanding and trust as well as address particular issues. The difficulties in striking this balance are evident already. The MB sends mixed signals, as with the FJP platform plank on the “need to confront the aggressive and expansionist Zionist entity” on the one hand and the assurances from MB/FJP leaders that all existing treaties will be respected. Some U.S. political actors oppose such outreach and in some cases reject the very idea of a differentiated strategy.¹⁵³ Making this relationship work will take skilled diplomacy and political will on both the American and Egyptian sides to maintain perspective on the overall relationship and avoid overreactions to every incident and news cycle.

3. Prioritize Political Reform

The United States should place a higher priority on political and economic reform in the Middle East not just because such reform coheres with U.S. values but also because reform will promote America's strategic

interests. Today, the United States is as interested in stability in the Middle East as it has ever been. The pathway to *long-term* stability, however, is to address fundamental political and economic grievances in the region. The United States can no longer afford to prioritize the short-term gains accrued by relying on regimes that cooperate on security issues but are reluctant to reform. As we saw during the Arab Spring, unaccountable, autocratic regimes and statist economies can be fundamentally unstable. Tunisia and Egypt most famously highlight the consequences of leaders refusing to reform.

The United States will have to assume some short-term risk in its relationships with regional regimes to achieve this objective. Regional regimes have made it clear that they are reluctant to adopt fundamental political changes – and they have their own counter-leverage to wield (U.S. basing rights being the most prominent example).¹⁵⁴ As the United States increasingly prioritizes reform, however, it may enhance its leverage among Arab publics by countering the perception that it prioritizes traditional security relationships so much that it will not act or speak out against domestic repression. To the extent that regimes do not reform, U.S. exposure to second-order negative effects reverberating from anti-regime politics is reduced. In addition, U.S. claims to being a force for democracy will have much greater credibility regionally and globally.

Though the United States may not always like the outcome of democratic elections, it should support political processes that have genuine internal legitimacy in the eyes of their own peoples. The United States should judge elections based on whether they are free and fair – not on who wins. Egypt may present the most imminent test of this. Whatever the outcome, the United States must insist that the SCAF return to the barracks and that civilian rule be institutionalized.

Bilateral security relations should be more conditioned on political reform than in the past. To the extent possible, this should be done through

Iraq's Strategic Orientation

Iraq's strategic orientation – including whether it aligns with Iran, the Persian Gulf states, the United States or none of these – will shape the future of the Middle East. Washington should continue to press Baghdad to adopt political, economic and security reforms because they are in the interests of Iraq's postwar stability. Even after the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq, the United States has an opportunity to help guide this transition. At the same time, the United States should recognize that Iraqi leaders will seek a balance in their country's relationships with the United States, Iran and other regional players. Keeping this perspective, the United States should use its considerable relationships with all sides in Iraq to act as a convener, facilitator and honest broker, clearly communicating that a U.S. long-term partnership with Iraq is sustainable only if Iraqi leaders show a commitment to political compromise and make progress toward institutionalizing political, economic and security reform.¹⁵⁵ If Iraq is able to overcome the temptation to slide back into autocratic and potentially severely sectarian rule, it could emerge as a leader and advocate for reform in the region.

incentives and persuasion. Security sector reform programs should continue to instill lessons of respect for civil authority and human rights in partner militaries that receive training from the United States. The International Military Education and Training programs have had success in helping military modernization and professionalization.¹⁵⁶ Many top State Department, Pentagon, intelligence community and White House officials have strong relationships with Arab counterparts, which can be used to press for reform.

Some regional regimes – particularly those with sizable Shia populations – may claim that Iran's malevolent hand is behind instances of domestic unrest in order to deflect pressure to reform.¹⁵⁷ The

United States should not be too quick to buy into claims of Iranian subversive activity, particularly those volunteered by regional regimes that are stifling Shia political opposition groups. By playing the “Iran card,” these regimes may be attempting to encourage Washington to dismiss what could be legitimate opposition voices. Multiple and independent sources – official and unofficial, American and from trusted non-U.S. sources – should be drawn on in assessing the extent of Iranian interference.

4. Support Social and Economic Reform

Social and economic pressures pose formidable challenges in the region. Many of the political problems discussed earlier will fade in importance if the Egyptian economy collapses – a distinct possibility carrying significant consequences. And no economic policy is likely to succeed in Egypt unless there is sufficient political stability for investors to risk their capital and for tourists to start visiting again. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently made this clear by explicitly linking the \$3.2 billion assistance package under consideration to political stability.¹⁵⁸ On the bright side, after a dismal 2011, Tunisia presents evidence of economic progress flowing from improved political stability – with tourism and industrial production increasing despite persisting economic problems.¹⁵⁹

If Egypt can reach an agreement with the IMF to prop up the Egyptian pound in an emergency, the United States should offer debt relief in concert with other principal creditors. This could be done as John Williamson and Mohsin Khan of the Peterson Institute for International Economics suggest – either through the Paris Club or more informally through the Friends of Egypt.¹⁶⁰ Of the \$21 billion in pledges thus far, only \$2 billion is from the United States. The largest pledges are \$4 billion from Saudi Arabia, \$4.5 billion from the World Bank and \$10 billion from Qatar. While each has its own bilateral issues with Egypt, each also, like the United States, has an interest in a more stable Egypt.

More generally, the United States needs to support social and economic reform across the region in ways that are counterparts to the “pivot to the people” discussed earlier. USAID’s programming, for example, should prioritize agriculture, health and education as areas in which benefits can most directly reach the people. Investment, including through the State Department’s Partners for a New Beginning, the North African Partnership for Economic Opportunity and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, should target reducing structural unemployment. Millions of young Arabs entering the labor market without jobs is a recipe for political instability.

Despite its own neoliberal preferences, the United States must be prepared to support national economic strategies that are neither wholly free-market nor wholly statist.¹⁶¹ In Nathan Brown’s description of the guiding principles of the MB’s economic strategy, to give one example, the United States should find much to work with: “first, it seeks to protect property rights and a market economy; second, it also feels that the state has a strong obligation to look after its weaker citizens.”¹⁶² That is a program the United States should, in principle, be able to support.

REDUCED DEPENDENCY ON THE PERSIAN GULF

In the long term, the Persian Gulf may become less important to the United States. The United States will soon need hydrocarbons from the region much less than emerging powers such as India and China, and the United States can reduce its dependency further by increasing its capacity to produce non-petroleum energy. Even in the event of regional stability, however, high global demand could conceivably result in increases in oil prices, which will affect the U.S. economy. Energy independence is not possible in an interdependent world. But reducing energy vulnerability by increasing domestic capacity through a mix of hydrocarbon and renewable resource production and lowering domestic demand through

conservation and efficiency is possible. This is good news in terms of U.S. national security interests because it better assures the ability of the United States to carry on in the event of another global crisis or conflict.

To capitalize on the long-term potential of being less dependent on the Persian Gulf, the United States should accelerate the transition from being the region's security *provider* to being a security *enhancer*, working by, with and through regional militaries to help them provide security for their own states. This may present two opportunities for the United States in the region in the long term. First, the United States should adapt its force posture and relationships in the Gulf, thereby lessening U.S. dependence on Gulf regimes for basing access. That leads to the second opportunity: As it adapts its presence in the Gulf, the United States will still have some measure of leverage and, increasingly, should pressure Gulf partners to adopt political and economic reforms. The United States and its Gulf partners will continue to share common interests in ensuring petroleum makes its way to global markets, countering terrorist groups and thwarting Iran's malevolent ambitions. These common interests alone will ensure close defense and intelligence cooperation in the long term.

Adapt Force Posture and Security Relationships in the Gulf

The United States should adapt its force presence in the Persian Gulf. U.S. force numbers in the Persian Gulf are already declining with the end of combat operations in Iraq and with the anticipated drawdown in Afghanistan, and top U.S. officials have already signaled their intent to avoid future lengthy engagements in the region.¹⁶³ In this context, any precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East, beyond anticipated withdrawal plans for Afghanistan, would likely alarm regional leaders. After 2014, though, when the United States and its allies have drawn down in Afghanistan, the United States should gradually reduce its forces in the Middle East, while maintaining a scalable,

surge capability for an Iran contingency. By adapting a scalable force presence in the region, the United States could pre-position the minimum required assets in the region to address near-term threats, while maintaining a surge capability outside of the region to respond in the event of a crisis. Maintaining a scalable force presence would help offset the risks of reducing U.S. military posture vis-à-vis Iran, while also lessening U.S. dependency on Gulf regimes for access and providing greater opportunities for the United States to pressure Gulf partners to reform. While keeping a mix of naval, air and SOF in the region, other force contingents could be removed. The presence of U.S. ground forces in Kuwait does nothing to deter Iranian aggression, for example, and is a legacy from an era when Hussein's Iraq threatened the region.¹⁶⁴

The U.S. Navy should continue to play the leading role in guarding the sea commons that allow the transport of oil from the Middle East. A disruption to this access could threaten global financial markets and a fragile economic recovery more than U.S. demand for oil, since the United States relies less on oil and gas from the Middle East than it once did. The United States will likely depend less on access to foreign energy sources 10 years from now than it does today.¹⁶⁵ Even though the context has changed, the United States must still guard the sea commons to prevent a disruption to the supply of oil and gas in the region. Over time, the United States should adjust its force presence to deploy the limited number of assets needed to secure the sea lanes.

While these adjustments add to the importance of maintaining some military deployments in the region, such as the 5th Fleet naval base in Bahrain, political reform needs to be prioritized even there (see the text box on Bahrain on page 32). While OPEC regimes derive obvious short-term benefits from supply disruptions that yield higher prices, recurring threats from Iran or terrorist entities that seek to obstruct oil routes are not in their interest. Moreover, current U.S. military deployments are

To implement a consistent and credible policy of prioritizing reform across the region, the United States should apply more pressure on Gulf states and should condition arms sales on political reform measures.

also geared to the overall threat from Iran.¹⁶⁶ These and other shared U.S.-Gulf interests provide sufficient basis for maintaining needed military basing. The United States, thus, need not soften its calls for political reform.

Going forward, the United States and Gulf partners will continue to share common interests in ensuring that oil and gas make their way to the global markets, countering terrorist groups and thwarting Iran's malevolent ambitions. These common interests will ensure close defense and intelligence cooperation for the long term. As mentioned, though, the United States should accelerate the transition from being the region's security *provider* to being a security *enhancer*. The United States, for example, could increase its combined operations with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners and over time increasingly put GCC members in the lead for these operations, building competencies in counterproliferation, counterpiracy and counterterrorism through training and experience.

Press Gulf Regimes to Adopt Reform

As the United States seeks to prioritize reform in the region, it will face an uphill battle in the Gulf. In the eyes of many Gulf states, fundamental political and economic reform poses an existential threat to the

prevailing regimes.¹⁶⁷ The United States will have trouble making the case that resistance to reform is the greater threat to regime stability, and U.S. leverage is limited in the Gulf. Since the United States continues to depend on Gulf states for strategic basing access, Gulf states have their own counter-leverage.

To implement a consistent and credible policy of prioritizing reform across the region, the United States should apply more pressure on Gulf states and should condition arms sales on political reform measures. While U.S. criticisms of Gulf states' oppression and heavy-handed measures could raise tensions, both regimes and their oppositions may perceive the U.S. approach of confining pressure principally to private channels as a sign of a limited U.S. commitment to prioritizing reform. The United States would thus weaken its leverage and undermine its credibility. Accordingly, affirming and enforcing red lines against the use of U.S. equipment for internal political repression will be particularly important for credibly demonstrating U.S. commitment to reform. Arms sales should be more conditioned on political reform through partial waivers and other mechanisms that allow for ongoing monitoring.¹⁶⁸

These issues are most pressing in relations with Bahrain (see text box). With regard to Saudi Arabia, the power of Riyadh's cash diplomacy, support for counterterrorism initiatives and quiet but effective pressuring of Arab partners have been essential to advancing U.S. interests in the region for years.¹⁶⁹ It is difficult, nonetheless, for the United States to ignore that Saudi Arabia effectively bought off the Saudi public's attempt to mount a "day of rage" in March 2011 by offering significant economic incentives not to engage in public protest.¹⁷⁰ And Saudi repression of its Shia minority in the oil-rich Eastern Province is certainly not solely based on concerns of the intentions of a malevolent Iran. Via sustained diplomatic pressure, the United States should hold even its closest allies responsible for their actions and encourage meaningful reform

Case Study: Bahrain

U.S. interests conflict in Bahrain. With the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet stationed in Manama, the U.S. security relationship with Bahrain is one of the most important in the Middle East. The 5th Fleet's responsibilities include: ensuring security for key infrastructure and transport nodes for the passage of roughly 33 percent of the world's seaborne-traded oil; partnering in counterterrorism, anti-piracy and interdiction operations, training and exercises; supporting operations in Afghanistan (and formerly Iraq); providing humanitarian assistance; assisting mariners in distress; and serving as a deterrent vis-à-vis potential Iranian aggression.¹⁷²

During Bahrain's unrest in early 2011, strong U.S. political-military relationships with Bahrain's officials were arguably an important element for defusing the crisis. However, Obama administration officials contended that the violence could have escalated further if bilateral political-military relationships had not been lever-

aged. Nevertheless, Manama did commit human rights transgressions against its own people, and many security experts and human rights activists heavily criticized the administration for doing too little.¹⁷³ Nor did robust U.S. ties with Riyadh prevent Saudi Arabia from leading an intervention force across the Bahrain causeway in the name of preventing Iranian gains of influence.

The U.S. \$53 million arms sale to Bahrain, which was placed on hold in October 2011, further exemplified the dilemma in which U.S. policymakers find themselves. In proposing the package, the Obama administration stressed that the weapons provided were meant for external defense only – and not for use against Bahrainis themselves. While true for much of the package, some weapons systems also had internal uses. While the Bahraini regime made some concessions and reforms, by most accounts these were too little to satisfy domestic and regional calls for reform.¹⁷⁴ The

Obama administration still went ahead with portions of the arms sale that were focused on Bahrain's external defense (counterterrorism, counterproliferation and maritime security-related equipment), excluding tear gas and some other predominantly internal-security related items, and broke the package into components each less than the \$1 million threshold at which formal congressional and public notification is required. This has neither stanchied congressional opposition nor quieted criticism from the broader foreign policy community – both national and international.¹⁷⁵

The prevailing view within the Obama administration remains one stressing reassurance and relationship maintenance with some quiet diplomacy and measured pressure. General James Mattis, head of U.S. Central Command, reportedly carried a message along these lines to Manama in February 2012.¹⁷⁶ Yet evidence is mounting

Continued on next page

measures that respond to the needs and aspirations of Arab publics.

We recognize the tension inherent in both conditioning arms sales on reform and building the capacity of Gulf militaries to take more of a lead in regional security. If reform is slow or nonexistent, this will constrain the U.S. ability to give its Gulf partners the capabilities and training they need lead regional security initiatives. If pressed hard enough

on conditionality, Gulf partners may threaten to purchase arms from other suppliers – such as the Chinese or the Russians. The United States will need to be prepared to accept this risk – and a possible loss of influence with Gulf states.¹⁷¹ But even if GCC countries turn to other security partners, common security interests (e.g., containing Iran and counterterrorism) will likely ensure that GCC security policies and force posture are largely consistent with and complementary to U.S. objectives.

Continued from previous page

that the longer the situation goes on without significant reform, the more radicalized it is becoming. The opposition was asking for a lot less in the spring of 2011, for example, than it asks for today. For the most part, there have been only limited Iranian links and the Bahraini Shia have had a largely Bahraini-Arab identity and Bahraini agenda, but as moderate forces lose credibility, more extreme ones gain opportunities.¹⁷⁷

With 75 percent of its population Shia, the largest Shia majority in any Arab country, Bahrain simply will not restore stability without substantial political, economic and social integrative measures. The United States should persuade the Bahraini regime that it must end violent crackdowns, release detained opposition leaders, open a serious political dialogue with the opposition, lift media and Internet restrictions and implement the recommendations of the Independent Commission of Inquiry (Bassiouni Report). This requires increased U.S. pressure within private diplomatic

and military channels to the extent that these produce results, but the United States must be willing to be more public and overt if they do not. The United States must affirm and enforce prohibitions against the use of U.S. equipment for internal repression as well as milestones linking political and security sector reform to additional arms sales. The United States should verify claims of Iran's subversive activities that are linked to Shia opposition groups; it should be wary of Bahrain playing the "Iran card" to deflect legitimate calls for reform from Bahrain's Shia-based opposition.

Pressing for reform will not be easy since U.S. leverage is limited. The Bahraini regime has its own leverage, most notably on the 5th Fleet's basing. In leading the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervention force into Bahrain and being quite public in its criticism of Washington, Saudi Arabia has made its position amply clear.¹⁷⁸ But unless the United States stresses to a much greater extent that Washington sees its own interests best served by prioritizing political reform, it is undermining the

leverage it does have. Washington can send this message at the same time that it works for Bahraini and other GCC cooperation against Iran. Addressing the Iranian threat is a shared interest, not a concession to Washington.

Acknowledging these uncertainties, the United States should step up contingency planning for where to station the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet in the event that U.S. force presence in Bahrain becomes untenable due to widespread unrest in Bahrain. The United States should not wait until the security situation deteriorates to develop these plans. However, the costs and complexity of such a move should not be underestimated. The 5th Fleet's usual configuration includes a carrier strike group, amphibious ready group or expeditionary strike group and other ships and aircraft, with approximately 25,000 people serving afloat and 3,000 support personnel ashore.¹⁷⁹ Preparing for a move of the 5th Fleet is not intended as a warning to Gulf partners. It is simply a matter of prudence amid uncertainties.

FUNDAMENTAL TENSIONS IN THE U.S. RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL

Fundamental tensions in the U.S. relationship with Israel complicate U.S. policy toward Iran, the Arab Spring and Arab-Israeli peace efforts. Many elements of the U.S.-Israeli relationship remain strong and mutually beneficial, and there have been political tensions and policy differences at various points in the relationship. Accordingly, the United States must begin to

work through tensions in its relationship with Israel and revitalize the Arab-Israeli peace process to ensure Israeli security and protect broader U.S. interests going forward.

Work through U.S.-Israeli Tensions

For the U.S.-Israel relationship to be as solid and sustainable as many on both sides would like, both nations will need to better understand, if not reconcile, their differing threat perceptions and priorities.

The United States can begin by continuing to reaffirm its core commitment to the survival and security of the state of Israel. In that regard, Obama and senior administration officials have taken tangible steps by helping Israel maintain its qualitative military edge, and future administrations should continue to do likewise.¹⁸⁰ Security assistance has continued to increase and includes \$3 billion for training and equipment through the Foreign Military Financing program, which in itself constitutes about 55 percent of a program spread among 70 countries. The United States has also contributed to Israel's "Iron Dome" program, an anti-rocket defense system that protects Israeli population centers from short-range rocket attacks.¹⁸¹ Israel receives sophisticated advanced technologies shared only with America's closest allies and friends. Intelligence cooperation and joint exercises are conducted regularly.¹⁸²

The most compelling way the United States and Israel can jointly engage emerging and existing power brokers in the region is by revitalizing Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

The United States should further foster shared interests not only in foreign and security policy but in science, technology, business, education, culture and many other fields through government and private initiatives. These include the U.S.-Israel Science and Technology Foundation, collaborative agreements on renewable energy and the Chamber of Commerce's U.S.-Israel Business Initiative. Strengthening overall trust and confidence between Americans and Israelis will create a better context for resolving policy differences.

While the United States and Israel agree on some threats and strategies, they disagree on others. While neither country holds a singular view regarding the threat posed by Iran, for example, there have been differences between the Obama and Netanyahu administrations.¹⁸³ Israel – a sovereign nation in which the historical memory of the Shoah looms over policymakers – will make its own decisions on whether to launch a pre-emptive or preventive military attack in an attempt to destroy, or to at least set back, the Iranian nuclear program. In our view, at this time, an Israeli attack on Iran would be detrimental to both U.S. and Israeli interests. As discussed earlier, the dual-track strategy of diplomacy and unprecedented sanctions levied against Iran still has the time and potential to work. Going forward, the United States must remember to avoid sending mixed signals that could lead to miscalculation and misunderstanding.

Meanwhile, as the United States engages Arab publics, pursues a differentiated approach to political Islam and prioritizes reform in its relationships with Arab partners, Israel's concerns about the emergence of regional regimes that could be antagonistic toward Israel will likely grow. The United States will need to reassure its ally that it remains committed to Israel's security and to preserving key cornerstones of regional stability – notably the Egypt-Israel peace treaty – even as it encourages the growth of and engages new power brokers in the region. In fact, the most compelling way the United States and Israel can *jointly* engage emerging and existing power brokers in the region is by revitalizing Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

Revitalize Arab-Israeli Peace Efforts

Just as true stability in the Arab states is found in political reform, true security for Israel cannot be found without the creation of a Palestinian state. And while the peace process is not likely to be a high priority during the U.S. election year, history demonstrates that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often finds a way to return to the foreground. Just in

the last few months, there have been flare-ups with Gaza, along the Golan, in the Sinai and in the West Bank. There also have been continued maneuverings within Palestinian politics between Hamas and Fatah, and even prospects for reconciliation. As hard as it is today to get a serious peace process in motion, it will be that much harder tomorrow if there are more settlements, given their potential to radicalize Palestinian and Arab politics.

Though many analysts declare the peace process dead and buried, a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine living in peace and security has been, is and will continue to be crucial to U.S. interests. The issue is how, not if, to revitalize the peace process. It cannot be just more of the same open-ended negotiations.¹⁸⁴ Three elements, in addition to protecting the treaty agreement between Israel and Egypt, are required for a revitalized peace process.

The first is for the next U.S. administration to take a comprehensive position on the terms for a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians based on the pre-1967 borders with limited mutually agreed-to land swaps, very limited right of return for Palestinian refugees, significant demilitarization of the Palestinian state and Jerusalem as the capital of both states. This would go further than Obama did in his May 2011 speech, which dealt principally with the land-for-peace element. In support of a final status agreement along these lines, the United States should commit to additional security assistance to offset Israeli security concerns and, along with others in the international community, provide additional security and economic assistance to the new state of Palestine to further strengthen the Palestinian economy as well as the institutions of a future Palestinian state.¹⁸⁵ In addition, domestic Israeli politics will continue to influence Israel's position on the terms of a final status agreement. With the inclusion of the Kadima party in Israel's national unity government, Netanyahu may be

able to adopt a more centrist position on both the Palestinians and Israeli settlements.

Second, the United States should support a regional multilateral process, including Arab states, based on the Saudi-initiated Arab Peace Initiative or the 1990s Madrid talks that focused on key regional issues such as arms control, regional economic development and water. While multilateral talks cannot replace bilateral Israeli-Palestinian ones, they provide a forum for addressing issues that affect the region broadly and in crosscutting ways.¹⁸⁶ Multilateral talks can also address tensions and opportunities that do not strictly follow the Arab-Israeli fault line. The Madrid Process, for example, included regional security confidence-building measures such as search and rescue operations and incidents at sea as well as some regional economic, water and environmental cooperation.

Third, and most essentially, Israeli and Palestinian leaders must themselves commit to a two-state solution in ways that get beyond "if" and focus on "how." Israelis are understandably embittered by both the Second Intifada as well as the violence that followed withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza. Though there is no guarantee that a peace agreement will bring security, Israel will never have security unless it also has peace with its most immediate neighbors. For the Palestinians, while significant economic, political and security progress has been made in recent years, unless this is seen as being toward, and not instead of, statehood, disillusionment will set in.¹⁸⁷ Major breakthroughs have come from courageous actions taken by Arab and Israeli leaders; these include Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic 1977 trip and the 1993 Oslo Accords. The United States helped create incentives for such actions and then reinforced, deepened and supported them. It could do so again. But it cannot do for Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab leaders what they will not do for themselves.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the face of sweeping changes in the Middle East, the easiest thing to do, both bureaucratically and intellectually, would be for the United States to muddle on, doing what it has been doing for decades, with a few minor tweaks to the strategy. This report attempts to demonstrate why that path of least resistance is perilous and how U.S. interests, immediate and longer-term, would be better served by an approach we call strategic adaptation.

At a time of great upheaval, when policymakers could easily become overwhelmed by the complexities of the region, we offer priorities for pursuing U.S. interests. The United States must respond to clear and present threats to U.S. interests while at the same time harnessing the potential of long-term trends and shaping the region to better secure those same interests down the road. If it does so effectively, the United States may prove far less vulnerable to trends in the region and far better positioned for more constructive engagement in the future.

ENDNOTES

1. In this report, we define reform as meaningful and sustainable steps to change the political, economic and security institutions and practices of a state. In terms of political reform, democracy purism is not necessary, but greater consistency in supporting political processes that have genuine internal legitimacy in the eyes of the state's people is. Elections should be judged based on whether they are free and fair – not on who wins. In terms of economic reform, the United States should be prepared to support national economic strategies that are neither wholly free-market nor wholly statist. But the United States should support economic strategies that seek to protect property rights and a market-based economy and that have a strong obligation to look after a state's weaker citizens. The United States believes the state should have a monopoly on violence. But in terms of security sector reform, the United States should continue to instill lessons of respect for civil authority and human rights in the partner militaries it trains. It should also condition bilateral security assistance on political reform much more than it has done so in the past through incentives and persuasion.
2. Both wars were supported by facilities in the Middle East. Some soldiers remain in Iraq, assigned to the U.S. Embassy's Office of Security Cooperation to continue security cooperation efforts with the Iraqi armed forces. For the Pentagon's outline of this strategy shift, see Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (January 2012).
3. For an initial post-mortem on scholars and the Arab Spring, see F. Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, 90 no. 4 (July/August 2011). Also of interest are essays in the special section called "Arab Uprisings of 2011" in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43 no. 3 (August 2011).
4. Lisa Anderson, "Demystifying the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, 90 no. 3 (May/June 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67693/lisa-anderson/demystifying-the-arab-spring>.
5. "Obama's Preference for Talks With Iran Faces Test," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2012/05/22/us/politics/ap-us-iran.html?scp=2&sq=u.s.%20israel%20threat&st=nyt>.
6. The "Middle East," which in places lacks hard ethno-linguistic or physical boundaries, has always been difficult to define for scholars and policymakers alike. For the purposes of this report, we define the region as the Arabic-speaking world, Israel and Iran – an area that roughly corresponds to the countries and territories covered by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.
7. Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation & International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
8. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 7.
9. The authors of this report have spent many years working in and on the Middle East. Previous research has taken us to Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. We have served in positions related to the Middle East in the U.S. Departments of Defense and State as well as in the U.S. military. These experiences gave us familiarity with some of the difficulties that face policymakers working on the region, who are our primary audience for this report.
10. For a historical discussion of U.S. interests in the Middle East, see William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1967-1976* (Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977). For the Obama administration's initial assessment, see The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," State Department, Washington, May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.
11. The so-called Rogers Plan of 1969 was the first U.S. attempt to resolve territorial disputes caused by the 1967 war, but the United States did not take an active interest in resolving the conflict until later in the Nixon administration.
12. Energy Information Administration, "U.S. Oil Import Dependence: declining no matter how you measure it," This Week in Petroleum on EIA.gov, May 25, 2011, <http://www.eia.gov/oog/info/twip/twiparch/110525/twipprint.html>.
13. This strategy is outlined in Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*.
14. The February 2012 attacks in India have not been conclusively tied to the regime in Tehran, but Indian authorities have ordered the arrest of three Iranian nationals in conjunction with the attacks. Jim Yardley, "India's Blast Inquiry Tests Ties to Israel and Iran," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/world/asia/indian-police-issue-warrants-for-iranian-citizens-in-bombing.html>. The attacks in India and Georgia followed a failed attack in Bangkok, which Israel also tied to Iran. Thomas Fuller, "Israeli Envoy Links Bangkok Bombs to Attacks in India and Georgia," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/world/asia/bombs-in-bangkok-linked-to-india-and-georgia-attacks-israeli-envoy-says.html>. U.S. officials, meanwhile, have insisted that an audacious plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in 2011 was coordinated at the highest levels within the Iranian regime. Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, "Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis' U.S. Envoy," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>.
15. The degree to which Iran could disrupt or cut off access to oil and gas passing through the Strait of Hormuz is a matter of much debate among naval strategists and defense analysts. For an introductory discussion of the issue, see W. Jonathan Rue, "Iran's Navy Threatens the Security of the Persian Gulf," *ForeignAffairs.com*, October 24, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136614/w-jonathan-rue/irans-navy-threatens-the-security-of-the-persian-gulf>.

16. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 2012 speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee annual policy conference focused almost entirely on the threat Iran's nuclear ambitions posed to the state of Israel. "Full Text of Netanyahu Speech to AIPAC 2012," *algemeiner.com*, March 5, 2012, <http://www.algemeiner.com/2012/03/05/full-text-of-netanyahu-speech-to-aipac-2012/>.
17. Bill Spindle and Margaret Coker, "The New Cold War," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 16, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704116404576262744106483816.html?KEYWORDS=saudi+iran+cold+war>.
18. While limited public information is available about Iranian efforts in Yemen, some relations are known to exist between Iran and Yemeni Houthis and southern separatists. While Iran provides mostly rhetorical support, arms shipments, purportedly from Iran, have been intercepted en route to Yemen, and U.S. officials have expressed concerns off the record about growing diplomatic efforts by Iran to engage political opposition groups. For more on Iran-Houthi ties, see Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 267-270; and on Iran's mixed success in Yemen's south, see Ghaith Abdu-Ahad, "Yemenis choose jihad over Iranian support," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/10/yemen-jihad-iran-saudi-interference?INTCMP=SRCH>.
19. Colin H. Kahl, Melissa G. Dalton and Matthew Irvine, "Risk and Rivalry: Iran, Israel and the Bomb" (Center for a New American Security, June 5, 2012), 19-21; and Jon B. Alterman, "The Gulf Cooperation Council States," in *Gulf Kaleidoscope: Reflections on the Iranian Challenge*, ed. Jon B. Alterman (Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2012), 65-66, https://csis.org/files/publication/120518_%20Alterman_GulfKaleidoscope_Web.pdf.
20. Toby Matthiesen, "Saudi Arabia's Shiite problem," The Middle East Channel blog on *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 7, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/07/saudi_arabia_s_shiite_problem.
21. Shibley Telhami recently argued that Arab states will feel compelled to pursue nuclear programs even if a deal is reached to limit enrichment on Iranian soil. Shibley Telhami, "The Israeli and Arab Dimensions of Iran's Nuclear Program" (Brookings Institution, April 10, 2012), http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2012/0410_iran_telhami.aspx. Competing theories hold that an Iranian nuclear weapon would not precipitate a regional arms race; for more, see Johan Bergenas, "The Nuclear Domino Myth," *ForeignAffairs.com*, August 31, 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66738/johan-bergenas/the-nuclear-domino-myth>. For a treatment of the dangers of escalation in an Israel-Iran crisis, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader and Parisa Roshan, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1143.html>. For additional context on the Iranian nuclear threat and U.S. policy, see Kahl, Dalton and Irvine, "Risk and Rivalry."
22. Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr. and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, 90 no. 1 (January/February 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67162/eric-s-edelman-andrew-f-krepinevich-jr-and-evan-braden-montgomery-the-dangers-of-a-nuclear-iran>.
23. Mark Mazzetti and Thom Shanker, "U.S. War Game Sees Perils of Israeli Strike Against Iran," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/world/middleeast/united-states-war-game-sees-dire-results-of-an-israeli-attack-on-iran.html?pagewanted=all>.
24. Kahl, Dalton and Irvine, "Risk and Rivalry," provides additional context for these second- and third-order effects.
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26. John Carlson, "Iran Nuclear Issue – Considerations for a Negotiated Outcome" (Institute for Science and International Security, November 4, 2011). For a general discussion of nuclear hedging, see Ariel E. Levite, "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited," *International Security*, 27 no. 3 (Winter 2002/2003), 59-88.
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28. David Albright et al., "Preventing Iran From Getting Nuclear Weapons," (Institute for Science and International Security, March 5, 2012), 10, http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/USIP_Template_5March2012-1.pdf.
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30. David Axe, "Navy's Tiniest Warships Could Lead Assault on Iran," Danger Room blog on *Wired.com*, March 22, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/03/tiny-warships-iran-assault/>.
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185. Increasing the dollar amount of U.S. security assistance may be less important than agreeing to help underwrite some of the security arrangements that will be essential to enable a two-state solution.

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2001); and Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Middle East Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) Talks: Progress, Problems and Prospects," IGCC Policy Paper No. 26 (University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, 1996).

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