

ISSUE BRIEF

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A Strategy for US Engagement in the Middle East: Contain Threats, Embrace Dignity

In President Barack Obama's first term, his administration withdrew US forces from Iraq, ratcheted up pressure to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions, began the adjustment to relations with post-authoritarian governments in Arab countries including Egypt, struggled with how best to handle an increasingly bloody rebellion in Syria, and attempted to restart diplomacy on the Israeli/Palestinian problem. At the beginning of his second term, US interests are at significant risk as the region continues to undergo profound changes, and Arab and European allies are asking for greater US engagement. The region also presents the United States with unanticipated opportunities, such as the development of Arab democracies and a reduction in Iranian influence. The challenge facing the United States is how to lead without dominating, and how to protect and promote US interests without absolving other actors of responsibility. Thus, the task for this administration is to develop a strategy: to match the president's positive rhetoric with meaningful follow-up in terms of diplomacy, assistance, and security cooperation.

US Interests

The free flow of energy and the security of Israel have been core interests for the United States since it inherited the mantle of international leadership in the Middle East from Britain following World War II, and they will remain important. Even though the United States will depend less

Middle East Peace and Security Initiative

The Scowcroft Center's Middle East Peace and Security Initiative focuses on Arab-Israeli relations, the conflict between Iran and the international community over its nuclear program, and new security challenges resulting from the region's ongoing political transformation. The Initiative aims to incorporate the perspective of regional and transatlantic allies into the security policy debate concerning an evolving Middle East.

and less on imported energy due to greatly increasing domestic natural gas production, it must be concerned about global energy prices, as well as access to resources by its major economic partners in Europe and Asia, which will continue to source most of their energy from the Gulf. And the commitment to Israel's security is part of the bedrock of US foreign policy.

Preventing security threats emanating from the Middle East in the form of terrorism or weapons of mass destruction joined the short list of US interests in recent years. Terrorism became a significant problem in the 1960s and much more urgent after the 2001 attacks in the United States; the assassination of US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens in September 2012 was a painful reminder that it is still with us. The proliferation of weapons of mass

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destruction, which might be delivered against US forces in the region, US allies, or the United States itself, has been a concern for decades, with the current focus on preventing Iran from attaining nuclear weapons and Syria from using the chemical weapons it already possesses.

The wave of uprisings sweeping the Arab region beginning in 2011 provoked Obama to add support for Arab democratic transitions to this list of interests. He stated unambiguously in May 2011 that “it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy,” a policy reiterated in his February 2013 State of the Union address. After a decade during which there was much controversy over whether the United States could or should support such principles, Obama clarified that they would become “a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic, and strategic tools at our disposal.”

A Shifting Regional Landscape

The Middle East and North Africa in 2013 present challenges and opportunities that are in some ways similar to those of past years, but in other ways are radically different. Few imagined when Obama began his first term that by the end of it no fewer than five Arab countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq) previously under authoritarian rule would embark on paths of profound change with the explicit goal of becoming democracies; that a sixth (Bahrain) would experience internal struggles regarding such a path; and that a seventh (Syria) would be embroiled in a civil war in which tens of thousands would die. While the demographic and economic challenges of a region experiencing an enormous youth bulge were at the heart of these uprisings, so too were demonstrators’ calls for dignity, meaning a new relationship between citizens and government featuring accountability, social justice, and respect for individual rights.

The resulting revolutions have not only unseated rulers and brought new political actors including Islamists into power, but they also have profoundly altered regional dynamics in ways that the United States has only begun to recognize. The resistance axis once led by Iran (which included

Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas) has been weakened by Iran’s support for a brutal Syrian regime, which opens the possibility of greatly diminished Iranian influence in the region. On the negative side, arms and mercenaries once controlled by Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi are on the loose and terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda benefit from a lawless atmosphere that threatens to destabilize North Africa as well as the Levant.

There also are enduring problems in the region—Iran’s nuclear ambitions, for example, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict—toward which the United States has devoted much effort without positive results. Iran is successfully playing for time as its nuclear and missile programs continue to make strides, despite the tightest economic sanctions in history (which are causing significant economic damage), and a multinational covert campaign (including in cyberspace) focused on pin-pricking the nuclear program. Unfortunately, if left unchecked, current trends point to a de facto Iranian nuclear weapons capability during Obama’s second term and an extraordinarily more dangerous region and world as Iran acts more aggressively behind its nuclear shield, and Saudi Arabia acquires such a weapons capability from Pakistan.

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Although there are no easy answers to these problems, the new regional dynamics provide some new, very significant, strategic opportunities. An Iran that is broadly unpopular in the region and without major Arab allies, for example, might be easier to deal with on nuclear issues. Demonstrations in Israel in 2012 and election results in early 2013 reveal a public disenchanted with ideology and eager for practical solutions to the country’s economic, social, and security issues, which might create greater receptivity to reaching practical bargains with the Palestinians.

US Objectives

Matching up US interests with challenges and opportunities emanating from the region yields two broad objectives for US strategy in the Middle East over the next four years:

- **Reduce and eliminate the security challenges** presented by Iran, Syria, terrorist groups, and the festering Israeli/Palestinian dispute. In order to do so, the United States needs to renew its leadership and engagement of key allies and partners in the region.
- **Embrace the dignity agenda** of the Arab uprisings to support the empowerment of individuals, building of democratic institutions, and prosperity through greater integration of the Middle East and North Africa into the international economic order. Change will be a long process and has already proven to destabilize North Africa and the Levant, but realistically there is no way back to the authoritarian *status quo ante*. The only way is forward toward a positive future, albeit one that will take years to achieve. The United States also should be prepared to support calls for democratic change in Iran and other Arab countries.

Specific Policy Recommendations

1. Contain and Eliminate Threats

- **Enable a Syrian rebel victory that helps to shape the country's future.** The United States has clear strategic, as well as humanitarian, interests in facilitating a Syrian rebel victory. The removal of President Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of an inclusive, democratic government would do more to advance US interests—and set back those of Iran—than any regional development in recent memory. For decades the United States has sought in vain a cooperative relationship with Syria. Now it is engulfed in a vicious, increasingly sectarian civil war in which more than 70,000 have died, nearly 800,000 have fled to neighboring countries, and more than three times that number have been internally displaced. The United States and its allies should

encourage the mainstream opposition to establish on Syrian territory a government dedicated to citizenship and civil society, recognize that government, ensure it has the financial resources to succeed, and defend it with means short of US boots on the ground. In the meantime, the United States should form strong relationships with carefully vetted armed rebel units—providing training, equipment, and weaponry—and, working with other nations, deny outside assistance to jihadists. With or without a United Nations Security Council resolution, the United States should lead a coalition that uses limited airpower in combination with local and regional military forces to help turn the tide in favor of the rebels. Only strong US leadership and action can give substance to Obama's call on Assad to step aside and keep alive the slim, fading hope of a managed transition rather than a failed state in Syria, and of a post-Assad government that is friendly to the United States.

- **Prepare for the coming Middle East cold war.** The United States should use all of the tools at its disposal—economic sanctions, regional and global isolation, demands for change within the country—to compel Iran to abandon efforts to attain nuclear weapons, while keeping military force on the rhetorical table for these purposes. It is clear that Iran is using North Korean tactics, successfully playing for time to develop nuclear weapons. But it is also clear that the unpredictable consequences of using military force would be more dangerous than a nuclear-armed Iran. Thus, the United States must prepare now for the likelihood that its efforts will not succeed. To prepare for this regional cold war in which the goal would be to contain Iran until the Persian Summer of 2009 returns in force, the United States and its allies and partners should redesign its multilateral diplomatic arrangements and military posture in the Gulf to account for this radically different landscape—which will almost certainly include a nuclear-armed Saudi Arabia. This means leading the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to much greater integration and considering some form of extended deterrence, strengthening the political-military and operational linkages between NATO and the GCC, and changing

the US regional military posture to account both for the substantial growth in recent years of Iranian ballistic missile capabilities and its looming nuclear weapons arsenal. The United States also should greatly expand, in whatever way possible, people-to-people engagement programs to leverage the Iranian population's affinity for the United States and the West.

- **Build security in North Africa and Yemen to contain al-Qaeda.** The United States should work closely with fledgling democracies in Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen to build military and gendarmerie forces capable of imposing a monopoly on the use of force within their territories. European allies potentially have much to contribute to this effort. Thus, the United States and European allies should reinforce each other's efforts to reduce ungoverned areas in the region that can be exploited by al-Qaeda offshoots, deciding on where the highest priorities for allied attention and action are (as the needs for governance across the region greatly outstrip its ability to meet them), in some cases deciding on a lead nation to work closely to build needed capacities, and strengthening intelligence sharing and other operational arrangements.
- **Get relations with Israel back on track and restore options for peace with Palestinians.** Obama's new term and planned visit to Israel provide a needed opportunity to reset relations with Israel. Rather than focusing solely on Prime Minister Netanyahu, with whom the president might well remain at odds, he should reach out to the Israeli public and political scene more broadly. He should seek to win their confidence and persuade them of the need to cooperate with the United States on security issues such as Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as to compromise with Palestinians on issues such as West Bank settlements in order to cultivate options for peace.

2. Embrace Dignity

- **Become the aggregator of international assistance to Egypt.** Of all of the Arab states that are embarked on transitions from authoritarian rule, Egypt is by far the most important in terms of its regional influence and

demonstration effect, for good or ill. The country now faces enormous economic and security challenges, which President Mohamed Morsi will be unable to tackle unless he forms a broader political consensus that includes secular as well as Islamist political groups, and Egypt receives substantial international financial assistance. While Obama was correct in saying that the United States cannot solve Egypt's problems, there is much the United States can do to incentivize the Egyptians to do so themselves. As Egypt's most important foreign ally, the United States should galvanize international donors (Europe, Gulf states, and international financial institutions) to provide grants, loans, and investments that the country needs to get the economy back on its feet, and to achieve the levels of growth required to generate sufficient jobs. As the organizer of such large-scale assistance, the United States can show its support (which many Egyptians still doubt) for Egypt's efforts to become a democracy, while also regaining some influence within the country. Although international assistance need not be accompanied by offensive public conditionality, donors should agree among themselves to provide assistance in tranches, and to deliver assistance only if Egypt restores a clear path to democracy, adopts reasonable economic policies, and acts responsibly in foreign affairs.

- **Get ahead of the next wave of revolutions by building relations with those calling for constructive change.** The decades-long US approach of working closely with Arab governments while largely ignoring those calling for change inside their countries was inadequate and positioned the United States poorly to take advantage of what should have been a boon to its interests and values. It is time to get ahead of the next waves of this region-wide movement—and make no mistake, despite the lack of clear headlines elsewhere, the core factors driving these historic changes are bubbling just below the surface. To deal much more effectively with this new dynamic, the United States should pursue a two-track policy: 1) Continued constructive relations with Arab governments, expanded to include serious and frank strategic dialogues on a range of global, regional, and

domestic issues, and 2) More vigorous and focused contacts with civil society and political opposition, and unambiguous public support for universal human rights and democracy. The foundation for this policy must be a continuous, clear-eyed watchfulness so that the United States does not fall into naive or cynical support for reforms that fall far short of meeting local demands. Nor should the US support movements that are hijacked by undemocratic groups with narrow agendas. In other words, the United States needs to work with its close partners in the region to help discriminate agendas that are supportive of US values from those that are antithetical.

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Conclusion

With so many ongoing, complicated, long-term, tectonic changes in the Middle East and North Africa, it is tempting for a weary superpower to reduce its engagement and avoid compounding the challenges. Yet underestimating the risks of inaction may be the most deleterious course to take.

It was wise to end the Iraq war and to draw down NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. But that does not mean that withdrawal should be the US watchword, for that would have calamitous consequences for US security. Already, the perception of US disengagement from the region shared by a broad swath of allies, partners, and adversaries alike has led to new tensions and uncertainties. It is time to restore a leading US role in the region that will continue to be the greatest source of dangers to the United States and its allies over the next generation. If the United States tries just to manage these challenges, instead of vigorously leading like-minded allies to confront and resolve them, then the United States will suffer a more unstable and dangerous world than is foreseen today.

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