



ISSUE IN FOCUS

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# False Dichotomy: Stability versus Reform in the Arab World

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With Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt's Sinai facing insurgencies or outright civil war, the Arab world looks very different today than in 2011, during the youth-led uprisings described hopefully as the Arab awakening. After initial optimism about the region's trajectory in early 2011, the United States finds itself in reactive, crisis control mode, scrambling to stave off immediate regional security threats such as growing jihadist militancy, in pursuit of an elusive form of stability, paying very little attention to the underlying drivers of either local or transnational violence and extremism. The result is a US policy that achieves neither stability nor reform.

The United States struggles with a palpable tension between its immediate security interests and the need for broader institutional reforms in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that would address the root causes of anti-US militancy. This tension calls for a nuanced approach that looks beyond short time frames dictated by US election cycles. The United States continues to support regional coalitions and dysfunctional governments enough to temporarily contain insurgencies and limit public mobilization, but this does not offer a sustainable formula for peace or goodwill toward the United States.

President Barack Obama's administration has articulated a narrow approach to the Middle East—limit military engagement, focus on counterterrorism, and emphasize multilateral efforts—but without a set of clear goals and means. Although there have been no recent attacks on the US homeland, terrorist networks are proliferating in the region, and the conditions empowering them are worsening. Security continues to deteriorate rapidly in Libya and Yemen; Egypt's extremist violence is no longer contained in Sinai; and Syria and Iraq are beset by civil war and the rise of powerful transnational jihadist movements, including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

### Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council studies political transitions and economic conditions in Arab countries and recommends US and European policies to encourage constructive change.

The United States simply cannot afford to maintain a narrow scope of US engagement, despite the US public's current apathy toward greater involvement in the region. To secure its long-term strategic interests, the United States should urgently and simultaneously pursue its security needs—beyond the specter of counterterrorism—and support pluralism, basic human rights, and inclusive economic growth. The United States and its partners have little choice but to seriously grapple with the underlying political, social, and economic drivers that lead to instability and the rise of extremism.

### Move Beyond a Short-Term, Crisis-Driven Approach to Security

The problems of terrorism on the one hand and the region's political and economic dysfunction on the other are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. Terrorism, whatever its particular form, is a symptom of poor governance, failing economies, and political illegitimacy of the nation-states in the post-Ottoman regional order. A counterterrorism approach that does not address the causes and conditions that lead to extremism is neither strategic nor effective.

Islamist militancy in its various forms is the product of old and deep political, social, and economic decay in many parts of the MENA region. Although the conditions in each country are unique and contributing factors are many, jihadist networks have emerged in environments beset by corruption, underdevelopment, and repression. For a long time, the United States has

formed security partnerships with Arab regimes that inadvertently perpetuate these conditions. To effectively combat terrorism, the United States should put policies in place that will ultimately mitigate, not exacerbate, such trends.

The United States must counter immediate threats to its security, but focusing only on short-term, tactical objectives, and arming and financing local security forces is insufficient to produce meaningful or lasting results. Additionally, local security forces are often corrupt, incompetent, repressive, and/or sectarian. Absent broad political and institutional reforms, empowering them can exacerbate some of the factors that fuel jihadist recruitment. The effectiveness of current initiatives to build the capacity of local counterterrorism forces is unclear, and the Obama administration has not articulated how piecemeal efforts will address the long-term threats from extremists. In May 2014, Obama announced he would seek congressional support for a new \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund to support, empower, and enable partners around the globe to root out terrorism. Although working with allies is a crucial component, to date there is little clarity about the fund's strategy, objectives, and uses.<sup>1</sup>

In Syria and Iraq, ISIS, a well-armed and resourced jihadist entity in the heart of the Arab Muslim world, poses an unprecedented threat to US strategic interests and possibly the US homeland, as does the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. Remarkably, their successes have not elicited a major revision of US counterterrorism or regional policy, which continues to focus on immediate threats, which aids repressive regional security forces and relies on narrow, kinetic action that in isolation may exacerbate the problem.

Across the region, given the lack of verifiable intelligence due to security conditions on the ground, US military personnel admit it is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of drone strikes against terrorist networks.<sup>2</sup> The US campaign against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen illustrates this. Intelligence officials in 2012 described AQAP as the next most important front in the fight against terrorism. AQAP has targeted the United States more than once—most notably the “underwear bomber” on a

## ANY US STRATEGY TO COUNTER JIHADISTS WILL NEED TO HELP STATES ADDRESS THE LACK OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, UNEMPLOYMENT, CORRUPTION, UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF STATE RESOURCES, AND REPRESSION.

Detroit-bound flight in 2012, yet thus far, US unmanned aerial strikes and Yemeni forces on the ground disrupted but have neither destroyed nor significantly shrunk AQAP. The current drone strike approach against AQAP is not a long-term strategy, but rather a set of tactics to achieve short-term goals. Such attacks, which inadvertently harm or kill noncombatants and civilians, generate significant anti-US sentiment and erode the central government's legitimacy and its ability to cooperate with the United States. This, in turn, worsens Yemen's border security problems, and empowers those who wish to harm American interests.

Egypt has a history of homegrown terrorist activity that has been exacerbated by state attempts to restrict political activism and eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood, depriving many Islamists of a legitimate political outlet and possibly increasing the appeal of militancy. Renewed abuse by police and security forces since the military coup against the Brotherhood in July 2013 has prompted an increase in attacks on security personnel in the Sinai Peninsula and urban centers (the jihadist group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has claimed responsibility for many of these attacks). The United States has a deep security relationship with Egypt, which complicates efforts to address repression and human rights abuses by the Egyptian military.

It is no coincidence that ISIS, AQAP, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, and other such groups take root in impoverished, neglected areas that are poorly governed and economically underdeveloped. Any US strategy to counter jihadists will need to help states address the lack of economic opportunity, unemployment, corruption, unequal distribution of state resources, and repression. Yet even this formidable economic challenge is fueled by political

1 Kate Brennan, “Pentagon, Congress Left in Dark About Obama's \$5 Billion Counterterrorism Fund,” *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/pentagon-congress-left-in-dark-about-obamas-5-billion-counterterrorism-fund/>.

2 General (Ret.) James E. Cartwright, testimony before *Constitutional and Counterterrorism Implications of Targeted Killing*, Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights, March 23, 2013, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/04-23-13CartwrightTestimony.pdf>.



US Secretary of State John Kerry meets with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo. *Source:* US Department of State.

dysfunction. Regimes that do not build accountable institutions, establish rule of law, and empower their citizens cannot deliver sustainable economic development or security.

### Advance Pluralism, Basic Freedoms, and Citizenship

Immediately after the Arab uprisings, many US policymakers and experts acknowledged that stability in the Arab world depended on individual empowerment and responsive governance. In his May 2011 speech—in response to popular protest movements and the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents—Obama stated, “it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy,” and pledged full US government support for popular demands of political and economic reform.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite some efforts, few US resources were actually mobilized and delivered in the end. Initially optimistic, US policymakers now appear frustrated with the obstacles to political empowerment in the region, including the

President himself. His speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2013 described democracy in the Arab world as desirable, but not a core interest,<sup>4</sup> implying it is no longer a central tenet of US policy in the region. This marginalization is a mistake, albeit a tempting one amid the rise of ISIS and deteriorating security in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

Democracy’s relevance to security lies not in check-the-box elections to satisfy international pressure, or political parties that exist in name only, but rather in the development of inclusive, responsive, representative political systems and legal frameworks that protect the rights of all citizens, advance the rule of law, and provide mechanisms to hold elected and appointed leaders accountable for their decisions. The United States should not have to be reminded yet again that countries that do not develop inclusive institutions become breeding grounds for deep grievances and eventual instability that spills over national borders. The popular demand for individual empowerment, basic justice, and human dignity in the Arab world will

3 Remarks by President Barack Obama on the Middle East and North Africa, State Department, Washington, DC, May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa%2>.

4 Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.



persist. There will be setbacks and successes along the way, and the United States needs to adopt a strategy flexible enough to respond accordingly, but built upon a set of clearly articulated principles that actually drive and guide policy decisions.

For example, the United States and Europe should think strategically about how to relate to Egypt's deepening military authoritarianism and Islamist insurgency, and how to avoid repeating mistakes in downplaying repression during the Mubarak era. On Libya, the key question is not only how to deploy US, European, and UN resources to stem the immediate violence, but also to be far more active and engaged in supporting an inclusive national dialogue and adherence to a political roadmap that is essential to solving Libya's security problems.

The United States should focus on core elements of sustainable political development: supporting pluralism and accountability, defending human rights and basic freedoms, and advancing the concept of citizenship. These are the essential building blocks of any healthy democratic system, and the United States should engage with regional actors to advance these core principles, and do so consistently and publicly. Instead, the United States has overemphasized or prioritized elections assistance, especially in the transition countries. Short-term calculations undermine the United States' ability to make progress on critical objectives that require consistent, long-term commitment. Inconsistent US support for rule of law, inclusive political systems, and respect for basic human rights has greatly damaged US credibility on critical issues.

The United States has four types of tools with which to promote these principles: government-to-government (private and public diplomatic pressure), government-to-people (public diplomacy), business-to-business (private sector engagement), and people-to-people (exchanges, education, and social media).

- **Government-to-government:** Both publicly and through private diplomatic pressure, the United States needs to acknowledge when violations of core principles occur and the stakes of such actions. Even if the US government is unable to take action, simply recognizing and, where appropriate, criticizing what is actually taking place is critical for local stakeholders struggling to advance human rights and basic freedoms. When it praises governments for nonexistent democratic progress for example, the US government undermines its credibility and potential leverage.

## THE UNITED STATES SHOULD FOCUS ON CORE ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABLE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: SUPPORTING PLURALISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY, DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS AND BASIC FREEDOMS, AND ADVANCING THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP.

- **Government-to-people:** At the same time, the United States should offer constructive solutions and incentives for engagement with local allies. What the United States can offer, and what is still in demand, are US-based education, exchange programs, technical expertise, and business opportunities. Exchange and scholarship programs have a double benefit: they are powerful tools to provide first-hand exposure to civic and democratic values, and they help equip young people with the skills to engage with the global economy.
- **Business-to-business:** The United States should work to connect the US private sector and business associations with their counterparts in the MENA region. This would not only drive regional economic growth and job creation, but also demonstrate and communicate that the business community has a role to play as a responsible corporate citizen, and can actively engage in policymaking and civic activity. The ability of private citizens, civic organizations, and business associations to hold government accountable, advocate for their needs, and develop policy recommendations is a key component of both a healthy democratic system and a dynamic economy.
- **People-to-people:** The United States should invest in exchange and technical assistance programs that connect civil society groups, volunteer organizations, students, and individual citizens in

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the MENA region with their counterparts in the United States. This will take concerted effort, since the United States has lost some of its credibility and will need to develop constituencies for what is being offered. Yet, despite widespread frustration with US policy, many Arabs would still choose the United States as the preferred destination to get an education or start a new business. The United States should take advantage of this embrace of American opportunity by expanding ways for them to live, study, and work in the United States.

In addition, such relationships are also built through new social media platforms that have increased the power of the people-to-people aspect and have profoundly transformed the potential for cross-culture relations. Governments have noticed this, and in Gulf states, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and elsewhere, they are considering or have already passed new laws to restrict the ability of people to use these platforms freely. The United States should work to keep these networks as open and free as possible by raising concerns in bilateral meetings, publicly and privately, and cooperating

with the private sector to play a constructive role in keeping channels open.

It is true that US leverage in the Arab world has waned over the past decade, particularly in comparison to the more muscular role of the Arab Gulf countries and Iran, yet in the four domains outlined above, the United States continues to offer something valuable that can function as a means of leverage and a vehicle to build healthier relationships, not only with the governments in question, but with Arab citizens themselves. This is particularly true for technical assistance, innovation, private sector development, and education and skills development—areas in which the United States and European partners have a unique value-added that is not surpassed by Gulf dollars.

The United States should recognize that over the long term, responsive, inclusive political systems that uphold the rule of law and respect the rights of all citizens are critical to advancing US strategic interests in the region. While urgent security threats and potential economic collapses cannot be ignored, neither can they be effectively addressed without establishing legitimate and accountable governance.

#### Promote Sustainable Development and Integration into the World Economy

There are many sources of regional instability, among them lack of economic opportunity, endemic corruption, and persistent youth unemployment. Many of these were driving factors in what led young people to the streets to protest and risk their lives in 2011 and must be addressed. Four years later, with living conditions deteriorating in many Arab countries, there is a sense of hopelessness and economic despair.

Further complicating matters, some Arab authoritarian regimes seek economic development in principle, but in practice they make little effort to build broad, inclusive economies that would empower a middle class, and thereby threaten the inner circles' privileges (and thus regime stability). Paradoxically, by refusing to build a state of laws necessary for a strong economy, these regimes secure short-term stability, but are laying the groundwork for eventual social, economic, and political unrest, as seen in the 2011 Arab uprisings. The political economy factor highlights that in the absence of particularly enlightened and secure Arab autocrats it will be difficult to achieve meaningful economic change in isolation from deeper political and institutional change.

The United States should focus on where it has a unique value-added, where there is the greatest need, and where it can have an impact—specifically, a US strategy



Students from the Middle East and North Africa come to study in the United States through USAID scholarship programs. *Source:* US Agency for International Development.

should focus on private sector development and address youth unemployment. While for decades the social contract in many Arab countries set an expectation among many citizens that their governments would provide jobs, this is no longer feasible with demographic and economic shifts. In the long run there is little question the private sector has to be the driver of future growth and job creation, particularly for new entrants to the labor market.

The United States needs to pursue economic engagement that will help struggling countries in the region achieve sustainable, inclusive growth by providing economic and technical assistance, promoting trade and investment, and encouraging political shifts toward fair, representative, and inclusive government and rule of law. Demographic pressures, a youth bulge, high unemployment, and anemic economic growth in nearly all the non-oil exporting countries mean inclusive growth is urgently required.

Given US congressional reticence to provide robust economic assistance to the struggling economies in the region, the reality is that the US government will need to focus less on direct financial support and more on providing technical assistance to MENA countries or

helping to unleash private initiative and business growth. The United States is the world's most powerful economy, and the US government should incentivize additional engagement by the US business community with the private sector in the MENA region, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through supply chain initiatives. With little appetite to provide direct budget support to Arab governments, the United States can help these countries gain access to international financial markets and institutions; foster joint ventures and investments in their countries; and offer a large US export market as a reform incentive.

Massive budgetary support from the Gulf has rescued some Arab governments from economic collapse, but this is a temporary fix to fiscal dysfunction, pervasive poverty, and unemployment. The United States and international financial institutions have the technical expertise, but Gulf donors have the cash and therefore the potential leverage. It is in the Gulf states' interest to see reforms that would lead to sustainable fiscal policy and renewed economic growth in the Arab world, as they cannot be perpetual donors for countries like Egypt. The United States should ramp up its efforts with the major Gulf donors to orient their significant levels of financial support and investments in countries



like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Yemen toward the structural and institutional reforms necessary to transform their economies and meet the basic needs of their populations. Injecting cash assistance to fill the budget gap or stave off currency crises is not a sustainable, long-term solution. A joint US-Gulf economic program, drawing on the respective strengths of each, would be a heavy lift—US relations with key Gulf actors are currently strained, and the Gulf states themselves are not models of sustainable, inclusive growth—but it is crucial.

Although trade agreements often face congressional opposition, existing agreements for Jordan and Morocco have had little negative effect on US domestic markets or jobs. The White House should forcefully make the case for free trade agreements with other regional partners. While the economic impact of such trade agreements may be marginal, the real value would come from empowering reformers inside the country to push for and implement difficult but necessary economic reforms that could strengthen international market confidence.

Economic assistance programs and technical support should focus on private sector development and reducing youth unemployment. These efforts should be increased, but in a more targeted fashion, and future programs should be based on an independent, nongovernmental assessment of what has been most effective to date. To advance private sector development, a US strategy should be two-pronged: leverage the strength and dynamism of the US-based private sector, and work with governments on structural and institutional reforms that remove constraints and distortions affecting the market economy.

The United States (in coordination with international financial institutions and transatlantic allies) should shift from a sole focus on macroeconomic crisis management to address systemic issues such as investment constraints, labor market rigidity, and access to capital. Such institutional reforms must be internally driven and motivated, but international supporters can play a role by offering technical assistance and creating an incentive structure that encourages reform. Such reforms should include reducing the dominant role of the state in the economy, introducing antimonopoly legislation, instituting more flexible labor market laws, and streamlining regulation to minimize the number of permissions needed to open a new business or purchase land. To address youth unemployment, the US government should help create the conditions for private sector development and SME growth oriented toward job creation, and increase

support for programs that help equip job seekers with new skills by funding or establishing vocational and technical schools, and supporting scholarship programs.

**THE UNITED STATES SHOULD BROADEN ITS NETWORKS BEYOND THOSE WITH VESTED INTERESTS IN THE ECONOMIC STATUS QUO, TO MITIGATE AGAINST THE DANGER OF EMPOWERING A NEW CRONY CAPITALIST CLASS.**

Developing rules-based, free market economies also contributes to individual empowerment. Private sector growth provides another channel for citizens—through corporate entities, business associations, trade unions, and syndicates—to engage in policy advocacy and contribute to the decision-making process. The stereotype is that the Arab private sector is elite-dominated and intimately involved with the government, but there is a diverse range of actors, including thousands of small and medium-sized business owners, who are not politically well-connected. The United States should broaden its networks beyond those with vested interests in the economic status quo, to mitigate against the danger of empowering a new crony capitalist class. The years before the Arab uprisings saw significant privatization and economic liberalization in some countries in the region, but this largely benefited regime allies in a closed-access economy, thereby leading to more instability.

Lastly, US policy should reflect that political and economic development go hand in hand; the Arab world cannot produce the jobs and growth it needs in the absence of functioning institutions, rule of law, and accountable governance. Without fairness and predictability, innovation and investment suffer, resources are monopolized by those in (or with access to) political power, and corruption thrives, while the majority of the population remains poor and

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disenfranchised. The turmoil sparked by the Arab uprisings, therefore, presents an economic opportunity, albeit a long-term one: building political orders based on laws and institutions. The United States must not miss opportunities to support indigenously driven political change in the region in this direction, even if it inevitably entails uncertainty. To cling to and help sustain dysfunctional states is to condemn the region to poverty and further instability, which can only have negative consequences for US interests as well.

### Recommendations

In order to effectively secure long-term US strategic interests, the United States needs a policy approach that addresses pressing security needs, while also attending to underlying political, social, and economic drivers that lead to instability and the rise of extremism in the Arab world. To do this, the United States should adopt a longer-term perspective that advances pluralism, basic human rights, and inclusive economic growth.

#### Move Beyond a Short-Term, Crisis-Driven Security Approach

- Broaden the scope of counterterrorism analysis and policy to focus more on root causes and political context, going beyond intelligence collection, covert operations, assassinations, disrupting plots, and “containment”
- Make a long-term commitment to training, educating, and equipping Yemeni, Tunisian, and Libyan security forces, including bringing security and military personnel to the United States. This affirms the premise that the United States is investing in the capacity of local forces to provide for basic security needs of their citizens, not only counterterrorism capacity that may respond to US

priorities but does not necessarily respect citizens’ needs writ large

- Commit to greater transparency and accountability for targeted assassinations, particularly when noncombatant civilian casualties are involved, clearly articulate criteria for target selection and action, and introduce rehabilitation for damaged communities
- Identify drivers of Sunni grievances in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and ensure that a US strategy emphasizes security, diplomatic, and economic policies aimed at addressing them, and at the same time, adopt a Sunni-led, local approach to countering Sunni jihadist militancy in these countries
- Provide diplomatic leadership and press for an international peacekeeping force in Libya in close cooperation with European allies to protect civilians, government institutions, and strategic assets, and mediate a broader political reconciliation

#### Advance Pluralism, Basic Freedoms, and Citizenship

- Consistently defend US guiding principles and values through public and private diplomacy, in coordination with European allies when possible, even while pursuing areas of cooperation on the security and counterterrorism front
- Invest in programs that help enable widespread use of new technology and social media platforms and take a public stand against restrictions on freedom of media and expression
- Support local actors and indigenous movements that defend human rights and push back against restrictive laws and regulations that constrain civil society organizations
- Amplify engagement with a more diverse range of civil society organizations, including human rights and democracy-support organizations, to nurture the next generation of leaders
- Reorient assistance programs to invest more heavily in scholarships for education and exchange programs that will promote the values of citizenship, pluralism, and tolerance
- Focus on long-term, consistent engagement to build relationships with citizens in the Middle East and



North Africa, rather than primarily on government bodies or specific leaders

**Promote Sustainable Development and Economic Integration**

- Increase assistance oriented toward private sector development and youth unemployment in a more targeted approach, based on independent assessment of impact, emphasizing technical assistance that will enhance local capacity in project design and implementation
- Make budget support or other types of direct financial support to central governments contingent upon commitments that are not only related to counterterrorism and security cooperation, but also economic and political reforms
- Give more attention in technical assistance to institutional reforms that will remove obstacles to the private sector, improve investment climate, and address the capacity and skills of the labor force.
- Develop country-specific assistance programs that establish or expand vocational training and technical schools that will help address the skills mismatch by improving the skills of the labor force, and expand scholarship programs
- Promote greater trade and investment between the United States and Arab countries by incentivizing US private sector and assisting countries in accessing international capital markets.

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