



## General Principles to Guide U.S. Middle East Policy

■ AMBASSADORS JAMES F. JEFFREY AND DENNIS ROSS

---

*By all accounts, the Middle East will be a priority for the Trump administration, given its concerns about terrorism, current U.S. military operations, and the long history of American successes and failures in the region. Unsurprisingly, much of the foreign affairs debate in the presidential campaign revolved around the region, especially in regard to responses to Islamic terrorism and Iran. Because the basic thrust of President Trump's global foreign policy is not yet clear, proposing specific policies for the new administration in one single region would be premature. However, considering the enduring U.S. interests and assets in the Middle East, and the challenges they face, laying out broad principles to advance these interests can contribute to the public debate.*

AMBASSADOR JAMES F. JEFFREY, the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, is a former deputy national security advisor and U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq.

AMBASSADOR DENNIS ROSS, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and counselor at The Washington Institute, formerly served as special assistant to President Obama, as National Security Council senior director for the Central Region, and as special advisor to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. He was U.S. point man on the peace process in both the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations.

THIS PAPER describes the following principles for U.S. foreign policy:

1. **Containing Iran:** Most important regional issue
2. **Defeating the Islamic State (IS):** Critical to regional stability
3. **Combating other Sunni extremist forces:** Still a priority
4. **Maintaining alliances:** Needs work
5. **Helping resolve regional disputes:** Useful, but not critical at present
6. **Exercising military power:** Essential, but requires caution
7. **Exercising economic and soft power to complement hard power:** Useful, but can be oversold
8. **Avoiding transformational approaches:** “Fixing” has proven counterproductive

## Introduction

ONE OF the most urgent tasks for the Trump administration will be to chart America’s way forward in the Middle East. Over the past two administrations, no region has consumed more U.S. resources and generated more controversy than the broader Middle East—from Pakistan to the Bosphorus, from Mali to the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Compounding this, the new administration will inherit three active U.S. combat operations with no immediate relief in sight—in Afghanistan, against the Islamic State, and against al-Qaeda—as well as one “frozen conflict” with Iran. According to the U.S. National Intelligence Council 2016 *Global Trends Report*: “Political upheaval will characterize the next five years in the Middle East and North Africa.”

The difficulties of thinking through a regional policy for a new administration are compounded in 2017. For most of the past century, U.S. regional policies have largely flowed from global U.S. policy based on what Americans understand as universal values: U.S. leadership of a global collective security system to promote liberal legal, trade, and monetary principles, integration of individual states into that system, and defense of that system

against opponents. This policy has come under pressure since 9/11, particularly in the Middle East. The Bush administration attempted a rollback of anti-American and extremist forces through military operations intended to bring about regime change. The Obama administration also deviated from the traditional policy playbook by reaching out directly to Muslim populations, attempting rapprochement with Iran, condemning Israeli settlement and other actions, distancing itself from previous American positions, and pivoting away from the region.

Neither George W. Bush nor Barack Obama succeeded, and their failures, combined with the 2008 financial crisis and the disastrous outcome of the Arab Spring, produced significant shifts in U.S. public attitudes toward international engagement, as measured by Chicago Council on Global Affairs and Pew Research Center polls beginning in 2012. The 2016 presidential campaign reflected this change, with two of the three leading contenders, including Donald Trump, questioning longstanding U.S. global policy. Indeed, while Trump’s foreign policy could differ in both rhetoric and substance from traditional foreign policy, it nevertheless likely will not deviate too far from prior American experience, assuming it is neither rigorously isolationist nor aggressively transformational. And in the Middle East, general principles can be developed to guide U.S. policy.

## Interests

IN A 2013 speech to the UN General Assembly, President Obama aptly summed up U.S. interests in the region: supporting allies and partners, ensuring the free flow of hydrocarbons, countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and countering terrorism. In that same speech, he specifically ruled out promoting democracy as a core U.S. interest to be advanced by the use of force. Each of these interests, as discussed below, is as valid now as then. And the new president has already signaled that he will not elevate democracy promotion as a core U.S. interest. If anything, the incoming Trump administration has clearly indicated a tilt toward U.S. interests, not toward values, in its foreign policy.

Allies and partners bring assets to any global system, and are valuable “ends in themselves” in anything resembling the current global order. The genius of the American world role since 1941 has been to share leadership and responsibility, rather than—as with Rome and Imperial Britain—running the system solo. Such collective security leverages American power, usually allowing the United States to play the dominant role in multiple regions, but with help from others and thus without exhausting its resources. There is a cost: such a system requires America to support its partners. Failing to respond to their concerns, even if they do not endanger the United States immediately, undercuts the system. (In his confirmation testimony, Gen. James Mattis, Trump’s nominee for defense secretary, emphasized the importance of the U.S. alliance structure as an essential part of America’s strength.)

According to the International Energy Agency, the proportion of total global energy generated by hydrocarbons will remain at about 50 percent. In its 2016 *World Energy Outlook* report, the IEA forecasts that the global oil supply will be increasingly concentrated in the Middle East and that oil prices likely will rise gradually by 2020, restoring purchasing power to the Middle East. While the region’s natural gas holdings are not as great as its oil reserves, it will become an important international gas exporter.

The threat from various Islamic terrorist organizations to both the United States and the international community has hardly decreased over the last decade, will persist even if IS loses its territorial base, and thus will likely remain the preeminent foreign policy preoccupation of the American public.

Finally, while the WMD threat from Iran has been temporarily checked, after 2026 the Islamic Republic can—as articulated by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—increase the size and enhance the capability of its enrichment infrastructure. Moreover, given the likelihood of U.S. confrontation with North Korea and its record of supplying unsavory Middle East actors with nuclear capabilities, constraining WMD proliferation will remain an obvious American interest.

## Assets

DESPITE the Russian intervention in Syria, the United States has extraordinary military, diplomatic, and, to a lesser degree, economic capabilities and relationships in the region, and consequently much freedom of maneuver. In relative terms, the United States and its local partners are more dominant in the Middle East than in East Asia or Europe. Throughout the region, U.S. forces maintain more than 70,000 troops backed by significant naval power. The U.S. Navy has basing or other military cooperation agreements with thirteen countries, from Pakistan to Egypt, and is carrying out operations in Syria, Libya, and African countries to the south. With these thirteen states, the United States has active military sales programs in the hundreds of billions of dollars. Together, the U.S. partners Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia offer military capabilities far beyond those of any potential regional rival or coalition. Two of these states have or are thought to have nuclear weapons. Together, they control fully or partially all the major regional sea chokepoints—the Dardanelles, Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab al-Mandab Strait—and U.S. air access in these areas allows coverage for much of the region.

Together, the six GCC states and Iraq produce roughly 25 percent of the world’s crude and a much larger percentage of internationally traded oil. The entire global economy, including ultimately that of an energy-independent United States, relies on that flow. Separately, Israel is developing extraordinary natural gas resources, and Turkey is increasingly a Eurasian oil and gas transit zone. Beyond weapons sales, the overall U.S. trade relationship with the region is limited, but U.S. energy companies play an important role there, and regional leaders widely seek U.S. technology and education resources.

U.S. diplomatic power rests on a number of important assets:

- the military relationships outlined above
- success since the 1970s in containing threats to the region—the Soviet intervention in the Yom Kippur

War (1973) and in Afghanistan, Iran's counteroffensive into Iraq and the "Tanker War" (1987–88), Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait (1990), and the campaigns against al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State.

- promoting peace between Israel and Arab states and the Palestinians, and
- acting against Iraqi, Libyan, Syrian, and—at least temporarily—Iranian WMD threats.

A final asset is the absence of a regional near-peer competitor. While the region has dangerous dysfunctional elements and challenges, the potential strengths of U.S. partners, let alone when augmented by the United States itself, far outweigh those forces challenging regional order. Russia is again active in the Middle East with its military operations, UN veto, and oil diplomacy, but its military capabilities, diplomatic ties, and economic weight are greatly overshadowed by those of the United States.

## Challenges

THE MIDDLE EAST faces two primary challenges to stability and thus U.S. interests:

- dysfunctional governmental and economic systems and Islamic extremism, manifest in Sunni violent movements, and
- Iran and its use of Shiite militias.

The two challenges complement each other. Islamic extremism with its ideological and transnational nature undercuts "Westphalian" state systems, while dysfunctional governance provides opportunities for extremist entities to recruit adherents and establish roots.

These dysfunctions have been repeatedly documented, particularly in the series of Arab Human Development Reports published by the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The 2016 edition reiterates findings from previous reports, including "weak economic competitiveness and the failure to establish good governance" and notes that "risky circum-

stances include ideologies of violent extremism...and fragile states..." (While the report focuses on Arab states, Afghanistan and Pakistan have similar problems. Iran, Turkey, and Israel are far more stable.)

Since the late 1970s, the Middle East has endured a seemingly unending succession of civil wars and international confrontations, with dramatic consequences for international relations. Although other regions, from Southeast Asia to Central America, the Balkans, and sub-Saharan Africa, have experienced violence and outside intervention since the 1960s, most have gradually recovered. By contrast, the only brief respite from Middle East crises occurred in the mid-1990s. The Arab Spring, initially seen as a way out of the region's problems, has created even further disarray, notably in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

Faced with chronically unstable governments and societies, regional and international actors have been hampered in their attempts to respond to threats to regional order. Over the past fifteen years, these threats have come primarily from Islamic transnational movements, including, within Sunni Islam, al-Qaeda and various local offshoots, the Taliban, and, since 2013, the Islamic State. The threat from Shia Islam differs, given its focus on Iran, which is both an expansionist "anti-status-quo" state and a champion of regional Shiite populations based on shared religion. In fact, Iran's use of Shiite militias to gain leverage in the region and to threaten Arab governments is one of the burgeoning threats to state security in the Middle East.

The Sunni and Shiite movements alike are implacably anti-Western and seek not just to combat but to undermine regional nation-states. With Sunni extremist movements, the goal is a regional caliphate replacing individual states, a goal partly, if likely temporarily, achieved by the Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq. Iran, meanwhile, subverts states by establishing alternate local Shiite military and political structures more loyal to Tehran than to their own governments. Both movements sponsor terrorism, seek WMD, and risk propelling the region into a Sunni-Shiite conflict that would endanger all U.S. interests in the region.

These challenges are exacerbated by two further issues:

- the longstanding alienation of Islamic populations from the West, particularly the United States, based on specific policies, including military interventions and support for Israel, and a general belief that the West wishes ill to the world's Muslim communities; and
- the inability of regional states to organize collectively.

The result is that support for U.S. policies is often muted, and the “whole” of the region's strength is less than the sum of its parts. The latter puts a premium on U.S. leadership; the former limits it.

## Principles

THE FOLLOWING general principles for American foreign policy in the region reflect U.S. interests, assets, and challenges, and provide a framework for decisionmaking. Specific U.S. policies, as well as priorities among those laid out here, will vary in accordance with the general foreign policy adopted by the administration.

### 1. CONTAINING IRAN

#### ★ *Most important regional issue*

Iran, as noted earlier, is attempting to expand its power by targeting various Arab states (Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen) along with Afghanistan. The Syrian conflict demonstrated the impact of Iranian policy in the region and beyond, as its encouragement of President Bashar al-Assad's no-compromise position contributed to the rise of the Islamic State, near-record slaughter of civilians, a humanitarian crisis affecting Europe, and the reintroduction of Russian forces into the region. Moreover, until Iran is successfully contained, the region risks descent into deeper sectarianism and a catastrophic Sunni-Shiite conflict in general.

Key issues to consider here include

- potential U.S. responses to the Russia-Turkey-Iran ceasefire in Syria and to the Turkish enclave in northern Syria;

- prospects for a long-term American presence in Iraq; and
- U.S. responses to the Saudi-led effort against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen.

On the nuclear front, options both within and outside the JCPOA are available to press Iran. A pullout from that agreement would raise two questions: what would replace it, and would that decision complicate the broader mission of checking, along with an international coalition, Iranian expansionism. A sure outcome of withdrawing from the deal would be to turn the spotlight on U.S. actions, rather than harmful or destabilizing Iranian behaviors. Smart strategy would continue to make the issue Iran's threatening policies, not our walking away from the JCPOA.

Additionally, an immediate challenge for the administration is fashioning a credible and effective response to Iranian provocations, from terrorist acts and seizure of American citizens to confrontations with U.S. ships and aircraft.

### 2. DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE

#### ★ *Critical to regional stability*

Given the high costs borne especially by Iraq in the fight against the Islamic State, and the threat of further IS-related attacks within the region and around the globe, defeating the jihadist group is an urgent imperative. Evidence of the organization's resiliency includes stalemates with IS in Mosul until very recently and against Turkish forces in al-Bab; IS's recapture of ancient Palmyra (Tadmur, Syria) from a Russian-supported Syrian-Iranian force; and attacks in Berlin and Istanbul. Thus, U.S. commanders speak of up to two more years to defeat the group.

Given the risks of such a long-lasting threat—including the need to divert resources from the Iranian challenge—the administration should review its military options, including the possibility of using U.S. ground combat units, as well as changes to rules of engagement and tactics. The administration must also draw Sunni governments into supporting the reconstruction of areas liberated from

IS—as well as promoting Sunni inclusion—to prevent the emergence of the conditions that helped give rise to IS in the first place.

### 3. COMBATING OTHER SUNNI EXTREMIST FORCES

#### ★ *Still a priority*

With the exception of the Taliban in Afghanistan, direct U.S. involvement against other Sunni extremists is limited. Beyond drone and air strikes and some Special Operations raids, the major effort involves training, equipping, and advising local forces from North Africa to Pakistan against al-Qaeda and its local franchises. This endeavor has been well supported by the Obama administration, but a surprise breakout by al-Qaeda in some locale is possible.

### 4. MAINTAINING ALLIANCES

#### ★ *Needs work*

Current relations between Washington and many of its regional partners are weak, a situation stemming largely from the perception that the United States has not responded adequately to threats ranging from Iran and Syria to the Islamic State. More effective action against these threats will rectify much of this problem. But establishing better policies takes time.

In the short term, these friends want high-level reassurances and responses to specific irritants, including

- governmental and human rights issues with Egypt,
- settlements and negotiations with Israel, and
- the Fethullah Gulen extradition issue with Turkey.

Once such bilateral ties are improved, Washington could more easily nudge partners toward the reforms needed to address the problems documented in the UNDP report.

A more clearly articulated policy emphasizing U.S. stakes in the success of the Saudi National Transformation Program (aka Vision 2030) is also warranted. Until now, no Arab country has produced a successful model of development, leading to a constant stream of pretenders espousing either secular nationalism or Islamism and claiming they

would restore the greatness lost to the region. Saudi success has far-reaching implications not just for Saudi Arabia but for the region as well.

### 5. HELPING RESOLVE REGIONAL DISPUTES

#### ★ *Useful, but not critical at present*

The United States has a long tradition of diplomatic engagement to resolve regional disputes and manage frozen conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian, Pakistani-Indian, Turkish-Kurdish, Turkish-Greek, Western Sahara, Sudan) as an element of regional security. Such efforts earn the United States respect from the governments in question and in the West, and remain a significant element of regional U.S. policy. But in the face of the four challenges just outlined, these efforts should be seen as secondary.

### 6. EXERCISING MILITARY POWER

#### ★ *Essential, but requires caution*

U.S. diplomacy must be backed by military force, which is usually aimed at achieving deterrence through presence and partner support but at times requires more-direct engagement. The use of military force for limited “restore the status quo” missions in the region has been consistently successful (Yom Kippur War, Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Iran-Iraq Tanker War, Kuwait liberation, defense of Kurdistan, defeat of the Taliban/al-Qaeda), and is usually employed with local partners and surrogates, with U.S. air and naval support. But the success of, and domestic support for, American ground-force engagement in civil wars and regime change has been limited, as in Beirut, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

### 7. EXERCISING ECONOMIC AND SOFT POWER TO COMPLEMENT HARD POWER

#### ★ *Useful, but can be oversold*

Assistance, trade, and other forms of soft power can augment classic diplomatic and security policies, but their strategic value in the region is limited. Most important are emergency relief and assistance efforts, such as U.S. support for Syrian refugees. These actions constitute a humanitarian “good in themselves,” strengthen stability in the affected

countries and Western Europe, and win esteem. U.S. engagement in the energy sector by American firms in the Gulf and Iraq, and U.S. government support for the Iraqi hydrocarbons sector, Turkey as an energy transit hub, or eastern Mediterranean gas fields also directly strengthen partners and the global economy. Other programs, from commercial promotion through governmental capacity building to public diplomacy, have a limited impact on either development of states and societies or attitudes toward the United States. As noted earlier in the piece, U.S. trade with the region is limited, consisting from the United States mainly of weapons, aircraft, and high-tech and agricultural products, and from the Middle East mainly of oil—although to a lessening degree. Meanwhile, U.S. messaging has done little to shift public attitudes toward America, and the effects of U.S. counterextremism messaging are disputed. Given this ambiguous record, the United States and its regional partners should not perceive these areas as central to bilateral relations,

or as an alternative to “hard” diplomatic and military power.

## 8. AVOIDING TRANSFORMATIONAL APPROACHES

### ★ *“Fixing” has proven counterproductive*

As discussed thus far, the region suffers from long-term social, economic, and governmental problems exacerbated by, and in turn exacerbating, security threats and extremist movements. The temptation, thus, is strong to “fix” the underlying sources of seemingly constant crises and threats, and the previous two U.S. administrations have tried to address these underlying sources in dramatically different ways. Neither worked, and both may have made the region less stable. Moreover, emphasizing transformational “end solutions” can divert resources from, and thus undercut, difficult but feasible regional engagement focused on the myriad immediate security challenges.

