

Sending the Right Message in Cairo: Advice for Secretary Pompeo

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#), [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#), [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#), [Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](#), [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#), [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#), [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#), [Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](#)

Jan 7, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/twjyh-alsalt-alshyht-fy-alcqhrt-nsayh-aly-alwzyr-bwmyw\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](#)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



[Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](#)

Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow and author of one of its most widely read monographs, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](#)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](/experts/dana-stroul)

Dana Stroul was the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow in The Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



[Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab)

Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

All eyes will be on the secretary's speech this week, so striking the right balance between President Trump's domestic imperatives and the realities of regional policy is crucial.

On January 10, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will deliver a speech on America's "commitment to peace, prosperity, stability, and security in the Middle East" as part of his eight-city tour of the region. The speech's timing and locale (Cairo) are conspicuous, coming ten years after President Obama's "New Beginning" address in that same city and three weeks after President Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, touching off intense debate regarding his administration's wider regional intentions. To inform the potential wording and discussion of a speech that may serve as the blueprint for near-term U.S. policy in the Middle East, several Washington Institute fellows offer suggestions below on how Secretary Pompeo can best reassure allies and appropriately signal adversaries at a time of great uncertainty on key issues.

We are worried about Russia. You should be too.

The Trump administration's [December 2018 National Security Strategy](https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/)

[\(https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/) named Russia and China as top challengers to American interests, noting that each seeks to erode or realign the international system. In working toward that goal, President Vladimir Putin has gained much influence in the Middle East over the past few years, and he would like nothing more than to see U.S. forces leave the region. But make no mistake, the United States remains committed to the Middle East and is well aware that Putin cannot bring genuine stability. Indeed, his intervention in Syria exacerbated one of the worst humanitarian tragedies since World War II. Thus, America's commitment to the region is rooted in both strategic and moral considerations. —*Anna Borshchevskaya, Senior Fellow*

We may not like Erdogan, but Turkey is not Russia, it's a key partner.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wants to govern Turkey with a strong hand the way Putin controls Russia, but the fact is that the two countries are quite different. While Russia lacks a legacy of electoral democracy, Turkey has held democratic elections since 1950—longer than Spain. In Russia, Putin tends to win elections easily, with 60-70 percent support. In Turkey, Erdogan barely crosses the 50 percent threshold, despite his strongman tactics and near complete control of the media. The bottom line is that Turkey, a country of 82 million people, remains pluralistic, diverse, and inherently democratic even under Erdogan. Moreover, Turkish citizens who oppose Erdogan represent a bloc that is nearly the size of Spain, both demographically and economically. In other words, even if Erdogan's Turkey looks like Russia at times, it shares much in common with European societies as well. U.S. policy toward Ankara should be shaped accordingly. —*Soner Cagaptay, Beyer Family Fellow*

On energy, kudos to Sisi, he's on the right track.

The energy world is changing, as is the Middle East's role in global affairs. In this regard, Egypt is an example to the region. Its major failures in electricity supply are a thing of the past. Its natural gas production has been boosted by the new offshore Zohr field, and gas exports will soon restart after a five-year break. Egypt is serving its people, cooperating with neighbors, and integrating itself into the world economy. —*Simon Henderson, Baker Fellow*

Standing with our allies is a key part of America First.

We believe it is up to the peoples of the Middle East to chart their own course, and we strongly support the efforts of our allies to defend themselves against threats posed by terrorism and Iranian aggression. We prefer to help from a distance: the best guarantee of any nation's independence and freedom is its own patriotic resolve. Some of our closest friends in the Middle East are renowned for their proven ability to defend themselves. But sometimes even patriots need more than just a helping hand, as America did in its own Revolutionary War. So let there be no doubt: if our friends or our vital interests are endangered in the Middle East, we will not stand idly by. "America First" also means that we are first among the world's powers, and we will not allow any erosion of our position, or that of our friends. —*Martin Kramer, Koret Distinguished Fellow*

Terrorists are in trouble—we will not leave until the job is done.

Recognizing that the battlefield defeat of the Islamic State's so-called "caliphate" is not the same as defeating the organization itself, the United States remains as committed as ever to partnering with coalition allies on countering the terrorist and insurgent threats the group still poses. We remain equally committed to countering the broader terrorist threat from al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, as underscored by the recent U.S. airstrike in Yemen that killed senior operative Jamal Badawi, who played a key role in the bombing of the USS *Cole*. Previous administrations made the mistake of cutting and running from Iraq and Syria prematurely, breathing new life into these groups just as they were on the verge of strategic defeat. We will make no such mistakes. As the administration's National Security Strategy observes, "Many of these jihadist terrorists [in Iraq and Syria] are likely to return to their home countries, from which they can continue to plot and launch attacks on the United States and our allies." We will not allow that to happen.

America also remains committed to countering Iran's malign influence in the region, its sponsorship of terrorism around the world, and its threats to disrupt freedom of maritime navigation. As stated in the past, the administration demands that Iran withdraw all forces under its command throughout the entirety of Syria. In addition, we are very focused on the regime's provision of weapons to proxies in places such as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen. And we continue to press our partners on responding to Iranian assassination plots in Europe. —*Matthew Levitt, Fromer-Wexler Fellow*

Thank you, Egypt, for leading the way on peace, the most basic human right.

Yes, the United States will keep working with you to support our shared interests and aspirations. And we will work with you more strongly than before to oppose our shared enemies of extremism, terrorism, aggression, subversion, and interference in your internal affairs by hostile outside powers. But at the same time, we will not try to fool you with empty slogans. For these are not primarily American responsibilities—they are your responsibilities most of all. It is high time for Arabs and others in the region to shoulder these responsibilities more effectively, by working better together on common security and development challenges, by sharing the burdens more fairly between rich and poor countries, and by putting old grudges to rest so we can all focus on a better future.

The first human right we all deserve to enjoy is the right to live in peace. So here in Cairo, the United States applauds Egypt's pioneering role in forging a just peace with Israel, whose fortieth anniversary dawns just a few weeks from today. Jordan has followed your good example, with similar success in saving lives, reclaiming lost lands, preserving stability, and maintaining the possibility for progress on the Palestinian issue and the broader Arab Peace Initiative. We applaud the enhanced cooperation between these three neighbors in keeping the peace, combating terrorism, confronting Iran's threats, and pursuing major energy, water, and employment projects together, to the great benefit of all.

We don't just applaud your efforts, we tangibly support them with many billions of dollars in security assistance. This is a record we can all be proud of, and it is one we can build upon in expanding the circle of real peace to include the Palestinians and other Arabs, as President Trump has pledged to do. —*David Pollock, Bernstein Fellow*

Don't mess with the USA!

The United States is not withdrawing from the region. President Trump understands who our friends are and who threatens them. We will provide support to our friends and help them counter the threats they face. We will work with them to prevent vacuums that the worst forces in the region might try to fill. No one should doubt our resolve or test it. We retain more powerful military forces in the area than anyone else and are prepared to use them should the need arise. They are but one of the instruments we have to promote stability, deter malign activities, enhance regional partnerships, reinforce local capabilities, and help resolve conflicts. —*Dennis Ross, William Davidson Distinguished Fellow*

In an age of strong leaders, people matter too.

There is a mismatch between U.S. objectives for the Middle East and the current level of resources and organizational capacity Washington has put on the table to realize those objectives. At the same time, the United States is mired in an internal debate regarding its appropriate role in working with the governments and peoples of the region, focusing on what we should be willing to invest with our military and assistance dollars and what we can realistically achieve.

Secretary Pompeo should not paper over the diversity of views in the United States, nor should he associate Washington exclusively with the desires of regional governments. Rather, he should balance two audiences and two goals: first, communicating to longtime U.S. partners that we are not strategically exiting the Middle East and that we will remain engaged with creative, sustainable nonmilitary tools; and second, speaking to the people of the region, particularly the two-thirds of the population under the age of thirty. Many of these citizens are trapped geographically and economically—either caught in the crosshairs of devastating civil wars with great power competition layered on top, or facing a dire lack of meaningful job opportunities and freedom of expression. In Cairo, Secretary Pompeo has an opportunity to affirm that America stands for human dignity and will not hesitate to speak out when governments and nonstate actors trample on the region's citizens. —*Dana Stroul, Senior Fellow*

It's still the economy, stupid.

America leads the free world not only because of its military might, but also because of its economic resilience and

entrepreneurial ingenuity. Therefore, as the Middle East weathers instability stemming from interstate conflicts and terrorist groups, it should focus even more on economic issues. The region has tremendous natural and human resources, yet it suffers from the world's highest youth unemployment rates and inadequate investment.

America can lead on these issues by showcasing its own economic system and business envoys in Middle Eastern countries. Unlike competitors from China, American businesses bring cutting edge technology and transfer their leadership and management skills to local staff. The governments of the region also need long-overdue economic reforms to boost job growth, support entrepreneurs, and tackle deep-seated corruption. Through organizations like USAID, the World Bank, and the IMF, we can work with regional leaders to tailor these reforms to their individual country's needs, enabling them to spur stability-inducing growth and meet the aspirations of citizens. Moreover, it is time for peace in the Middle East to pay economic dividends via trade, investment, and educational exchanges. —

Bilal Wahab, Nathan and Esther K. Wagner Fellow ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](#)

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Jordan \(/policy-analysis/jordan\)](#)

[Middle East \(/policy-analysis/middle-east\)](#)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)