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Thank you, Marty, for that introduction. And thanks to Rob Satloff and Dennis Ross for inviting me to address this distinguished gathering.

I welcome the opportunity to speak here tonight. For nearly 30 years, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has helped the United States government better understand and respond to policy challenges in the Middle East.

Ahead of my recent trip to the region, my team and I benefited greatly from consultations with Dennis Ross and others at the Institute. Now that I have returned, it seems appropriate to share my perspective as Secretary of Defense on the complex challenges facing U.S. strategic interests in this critical part of the world.

I have long had an interest in the Middle East and its rich and complicated history, vibrant cultures, and complex politics. It came to me not through academics, travel, or *National Geographic* magazine but rather through abrupt intrusion in June 1967, when the Six-Day War broke out during my Army Basic Training in Fort Bliss, Texas. This region burst into my world when our company's Drill Sergeant suggested that half of us would be going to Vietnam, and the other half to the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, or the West Bank.

The knowledge that you probably would be going to war in a far off land gives "paying attention" a new meaning. I still recall Sergeant Joyce asking: "What do you like, Hagel, dry heat or hot and humid?"

For the next few days, we followed the news closely on the radio. No one knew whether this was the beginning of another world conflict. Then, suddenly, the war was over. Yet even as our focus returned to Vietnam, it was clear that religious, ethnic, and geopolitical unrest in the Middle East would be a global security challenge for many years to come.

That reality is inescapable today as the region continues to undergo a period of uprising and turmoil that has uprooted an old order and transformed the lives of tens of millions of people for better and for worse.

Change has come with unprecedented speed, on a scale not witnessed in the region since the revolutions of the 1950s. It began with citizens peacefully demanding their most basic universal rights. It has been made more complex and violent by the explosive convergence of sectarian conflict, economic disparity, human rights, technology, and struggles over identity and borders. Robert Kaplan recently wrote that the most appropriate image of the present-day Middle East is a medieval map where frontiers are not clearly and precisely defined – what he called "a world of vague and overlapping shadows of influence."

This tumultuous landscape presents a new set of security challenges to the United States and our allies. Syria's civil war is putting its stockpiles of chemical weapons and advanced conventional weapons at risk, and the escalation of violence threatens to spill across its borders. Iran's support for the Assad regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, its destabilizing activities in the Persian Gulf, and its nuclear ambitions pose a clear threat to the United States, Israel, the nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the wider world. Meanwhile, even as core Al Qaeda has been substantially weakened in recent years, affiliated terrorist groups like the al-Nusra Front are seeking new footholds in the region.

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President Obama has been clear that America's national security interests in the Middle East include the security of Israel, supporting our allies, fighting terrorism, preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, pursuing Middle East peace, playing a stabilizing role with our regional partners, and working to support democratic transitions in Yemen, North Africa, and ultimately in Syria.

The Department of Defense helps protect U.S. interests through our military presence in the region, our defense cooperation, and our work to enhance the military capabilities of allies. Each of these aspects of our defense strategy in the Middle East was a focus of my trip to the region – which included visits to Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Israel is America's closest friend and ally in the Middle East. During a series of meetings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem with a former Washington Institute fellow, Minister of Defense Ya'alon, President Peres, and Prime Minister Netanyahu, I conveyed our continued commitment to enhancing defense cooperation – which has reached unprecedented levels in recent years.

One of the core principles of U.S.-Israel security cooperation is America's commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge – its capacity to defeat any threat or combination of threats from state or non-state actors. As I emphasized during the trip, Israel is a sovereign nation and has the right to defend itself.

The Department of Defense works closely with the Ministry of Defense to develop and field the versatile range of advanced capabilities Israel needs to defend its people and its interests. One current example, among many, is our close cooperation on rocket and missile defense efforts – including Iron Dome, Arrow, and David's Sling.

Beyond rocket and missile defense cooperation, DoD has been working for more than a year to increase Israel's ability to confront and respond to a range of other threats. These efforts culminated in our announcement last month that the United States has agreed to release a package of advanced new capabilities, including anti-radiation missiles and more effective radars for its fleet of fighter jets, KC-135 refueling aircraft and the V-22 Osprey. Along with Israel's status as the only Middle Eastern nation participating in the Joint Strike Fighter program, this new capabilities package will significantly upgrade their qualitative military edge.

Israel's security is further enhanced by America's defense cooperation with other regional allies. In my consultations with Israeli leadership, I emphasized that strong U.S. security relationships with Arab nations – including Egypt and Jordan, and our partners in the Gulf – are not only in our strategic interests, they are also in Israel's security interests.

Among the most important of these relationships is our defense partnership with Egypt. Our military-to-military relationship played an important stabilizing role during Egypt's revolution. During my visit to Cairo, I met with President Morsi and Minister of Defense Al-Sisi to affirm America's continued commitment to our strategic partnership, and to express our continued desire to work together to achieve common security objectives. These include countering violent extremism, ensuring the security of Egypt's borders and the Sinai region, maintaining the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel, and supporting Egypt's democratic transition.

Both President Morsi and Minister Al-Sisi underscored their commitment to the Camp David Peace Treaty and to improving cooperation on border security and the Sinai. The Department of Defense is working with the Egyptians to help them improve their capabilities to deal with these challenges, and counter terrorism. We are also making clear that progress on political and economic fronts will help ensure that Egypt maintains U.S. support – particularly

given congressional concerns. As President Morsi and the Egyptian government work to implement political and economic reform, they will find a strong partner in the United States. That has been underscored by President Obama and Secretary Kerry.

The Kingdom of Jordan is another key U.S. partner in the region facing its own set of political, economic, and security challenges – including its border with Syria. In my visit to Amman, I reassured the Jordanians that the United States is committed to the stability of Jordan, and to deepening our close defense cooperation and joint contingency planning with the Jordanian military. Hundreds of DoD personnel are working alongside their Jordanian counterparts to enhance Jordan’s border security and counter-chemical weapons capabilities. As President Obama has said, we are also supporting King Abdullah’s efforts to pursue political and economic reforms within Jordan.

As in Israel, the civil war in Syria was a focus of my discussions in Amman. As you all know, the conflict in Syria is intensifying and becoming more sectarian. The possibilities of state fragmentation are increasing, as are the risks of extremism and proliferation. The humanitarian situation is worsening.

The situation is complex and combustible. The United States has been leading the international community in organizing and applying sanctions, and is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. Earlier today in Rome, Secretary Kerry announced that the President has authorized an additional \$100 million in humanitarian aid for the Syrian people. This brings our total humanitarian assistance to nearly \$510 million.

We have given non-lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition, including the armed opposition, and that support is growing. The U.S. military has been very involved in delivering those supplies. We are also urging Russia and China to do more to help resolve this conflict, because it is also in their interests to end the war. As you know, Secretary Kerry was in Russia this week meeting with Russian leaders on the Syrian situation as well as other bi-lateral interests. Coming out of those meetings, Secretary Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced they will seek to convene an international conference, with representatives of the Syrian government and opposition, to determine how to implement a political transition.

Using the full range of tools, the United States will continue to work toward achieving our goal of ending the violence and helping the Syrian people transition to a post-Assad authority. This will help restore stability, peace, and hope for all Syrian people. That goal is shared by our allies in the region – not only those bordering Syria, but also our partners in the Gulf.

During the course of my discussions in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, concerns over Iran’s support for the Assad regime, its destabilizing activities, and its nuclear program were at the top of the agenda. The United States will continue to lead diplomatic efforts and international economic sanctions to pressure Iran into abandoning the pursuit of a nuclear weapon, and meeting their international obligations. There is a presidential election next month in Iran, and no one can predict with certainty if that might affect the future direction of Iranian policies. As you all know, President Obama has made clear that our policy is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and he has taken no option off the table to ensure that outcome. I stressed that point during my discussions in the Gulf.

A key element of our efforts to counter Iranian threats is building a cooperative defense network – raising the military capabilities of our partners in the Gulf who share our commitment to regional security and our concerns about Iran and violent extremism on the Arabian Peninsula.

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While in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, I finalized agreements to provide their Air Forces with access to significant new capabilities. Saudi Arabia has committed to purchasing all 84 Boeing F-15SA fighter aircraft that were part of a landmark sale in 2010. The United Arab Emirates is moving forward with the purchase of 25 F-16 Desert Falcons, which will further enhance their ability to participate in coalition operations such as Libya and Afghanistan, where they have made important contributions. Along with other common efforts with Gulf States in areas such as missile defense, this new arrangement ensures that we are coordinating effectively against Iran and other shared security challenges.

Our joint exercises – including land, air, and sea scenarios – allow U.S. and Gulf Cooperation Council militaries to maintain readiness and improve the ability of our forces to work together seamlessly. One example is the International Mine Countermeasure Exercises, which began this week in the Persian Gulf and are hosted by the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet.

A robust U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf has been a priority for the Department. Even as the number of U.S. troops in the region has decreased since the end of the Iraq war, we have made a determined effort to position high-end air, missile defense, and naval assets to deter Iranian aggression and respond to other contingencies – such as F-22 fighters, ballistic missile defense ships and sophisticated radars, mine countermeasure assets, and advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft. We have also maintained a significant U.S. Army presence in Kuwait. Even as we put our presence on a more sustainable long-term footing, our capabilities in the region will far exceed those in place prior to September 11, 2001. Our defense relationships are also much stronger and far more robust.

The Department of Defense is adjusting its global footprint and activities as we adapt to declining defense budgets at home, but the President's defense strategic guidance makes clear that the Middle East remains a top priority and that we will remain prepared to deal with the full range of threats to our interests at this time of uncertainty and turmoil.

Each nation in the region is different, and facing different combinations of threats. But these are regional challenges I've described tonight – whether the nuclear challenge posed by Iran, dangerous instability in Syria, or the continuing threat of al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. These common challenges must be met through the force of coalitions of common interests, which include Israel and our other allies in the region.

A common thread woven into the Middle East fabric is that the most enduring and effective solutions to the challenges facing the region are political, not military. America's role in the Middle East is to continue to help influence and shape the course of events – using diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, intelligence, and security tools in coordination with our allies.

More than forty five years after I first learned about the Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and West Bank as a young Army recruit, I found myself surveying this terrain aboard an IDF helicopter alongside another old soldier – Israeli Minister of Defense Bogie Ya'alon.

As we toured the region, I thought about what is possible if these democratic transitions in the Middle East can succeed, and if a sustainable and comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians is ultimately achieved.

The old order in the Middle East is disappearing, and what will replace it remains unknown. There will continue to be instability in the region as this process plays out, and we all must adjust accordingly. The best hope for long-term stability relies on countries like Egypt, Libya, and Syria making transitions to democratic rule. These transitions need to be supported

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by institutions and legal frameworks that respect the life, liberties and property of all their citizens.

To assist these nations in achieving these goals, the United States will remain engaged in helping shape the new order, but we must engage wisely. This will require a clear understanding of our national interests, our limitations, and an appreciation for the complexities of this unpredictable, contradictory, yet hopeful region of the world.

Thank you.

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