



## **POLICY ROUNDTABLE:**

### **The Future of the Middle East**

*February 13, 2020*

#### Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: Ties That No Longer Bind? Present Dynamics and Future Prospects for the U.S.-Saudi Relationship," by Andrew Leber
2. "The End of the Middle East's Primacy in U.S. Foreign Policy," by Andrew Miller
3. "Understanding the Changes in Turkey's Foreign Policy: International Politics, the AKP, and Turkish National Identity," by Steven A. Cook
4. "Would a Different Iranian Regime Behave Differently?" by Ariane M. Tabatabai
5. "Where Do We Go from Here? Nuclear Proliferation Scenarios to Watch for in the Middle East," by Or (Ori) Rabinowitz

## Summary

What does the future hold for the Middle East and U.S. policy in the region? We asked a group of scholars and practitioners to weigh in and discuss.

## 1. Introduction: Ties That No Longer Bind? Present Dynamics and Future Prospects for the U.S.-Saudi Relationship

*Andrew Leber*

In discussions of a future U.S. foreign policy, the Middle East and North Africa loom large — whether as a proving ground for U.S. security commitments or as testament to the missed opportunities of an overly militarized foreign policy. The past year has seen Democratic presidential candidates debate the need to wind down America’s “forever wars” in the region, even as the Trump administration has veered between the president’s desire to “look tough” by confronting Iran and his fears that a broader conflict might endanger his re-election chances. Regardless of the outcome of this year’s election, however, an effective set of U.S. policies toward the Middle East must go beyond simply criticizing the invasion of Iraq (nearly 17 years past) or seeking regime change in Iran because it plays well at home.

To begin sketching out the specifics of U.S. interests in the Middle East and potential policies to achieve them, we have gathered together a group of experienced academics and practitioners. The other contributors to this roundtable — Andrew Miller, Steven Cook, Ariane Tabatabai, and Ori Rabinowitz — each emphasize the structural pressures bearing down on longstanding security arrangements in the Middle East, the means of securing them, U.S. interests in light of these pressures, and the independent security calculations of regional partners and adversaries.

Andrew Miller first zooms out to consider the broad pressures on U.S. policymakers to reorient military spending toward deterring “near-peer” competitors and economic outreach toward the world’s vibrant economies (i.e., anywhere other than the Middle

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

East). As the region's transit routes become less crucial to U.S. military operations, Middle Eastern terrorism proves less of an imminent threat to U.S. security, and even close partners such as Israel can no longer take U.S. support for granted, Miller argues that clear planning is needed to redefine and secure U.S. interests. He proposes a reduction in U.S. military presence in the region, more effective use of aid conditionality to spur economic and political reform, and a clear statement of which threats ought to actually trigger a U.S. intervention.

To be sure, the United States is not the only actor whose foreign policy choices in the Middle East are guided by changing economic prospects and security concerns. In a review of Turkey's foreign policy choices stretching back two decades, Steven Cook argues that "a persisting set of myths" have obscured a steady divergence of Turkish and Western security interests since the close of the Cold War. While the rise of the Justice and Development Party has spurred renewed Turkish activism in Middle East affairs, Cook concludes that the door closing on E.U. membership in 2006 and a series of incoherent U.S. policies on the Syrian conflict have encouraged Turkey to diversify its security partnerships away from traditional NATO allies.

Ariane Tabatabai likewise cautions that we should not expect regime change in Iran to spur a dramatically new approach to the same set of economic prospects and security concerns. In assessing the shah of Iran's approach to nuclear development and regional proxy wars, she emphasizes clear continuities with the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic over the past few decades. Tabatabai therefore encourages policymakers and analysts to seriously consider that "Iran's behavior may not fundamentally change" even if the United States were willing to absorb the enormous costs of regime change.

Finally, in considering potential trajectories of proliferation in the Middle East, Ori Rabinowitz considers the possibility that declining U.S. engagement in the region could spur a renewed push for nuclear weapons, thereby challenging Israel’s regional nuclear monopoly. Should the United States prove unable or unwilling to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions, erstwhile U.S. security partners might move forward with nuclear programs of their own. For Saudi Arabia, however, any U.S. or Israeli acquiescence to a future nuclear program might hinge on growing Israeli-Saudi bilateral relations.

This roundtable seeks to understand the strategic significance of the Middle East for U.S. policymakers — as well as the strategic significance of a less-engaged United States for leaders within the region. Throughout, it highlights the importance of clear prioritization and planning in order to keep U.S. retrenchment in the region from turning into a rout, as well as the need to recognize clear limits on the ability of the United States to secure its interests by fiat.

## **Drilling Down on the U.S.-Saudi Relationship**

In the past several years, few U.S. security partnerships the world over have provoked as much political intrigue and media scrutiny as the 75-year relationship between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Even as the Saudi government garnered much positive press and some goodwill for easing longstanding restrictions on entertainment and women’s freedoms, it attracted nearly unprecedented political pressure from the U.S. Congress over the assassination of columnist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul and the conduct of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. With even former Vice President Joe Biden openly describing Saudi Arabia as a “pariah,” U.S. policy toward the kingdom

will serve as an important indicator of how serious future administrations are about revisiting U.S. engagement with the region writ large.<sup>1</sup>

The two countries have long presented a stark contrast: a secular, liberal, free-wheeling democracy working hand-in-hand with an absolute monarchy, governed in accordance with the preferences of a deeply conservative clerical establishment. Since 1945, oil has formed the cornerstone of that relationship. Saudi Arabia's need to develop and profit from its immense oil reserves has, since that time, been met in great part by an ever-expanding U.S. demand for fossil fuels. Depending on one's perspective, decades of cooperation between the republic and the kingdom represent either a superb example of shared security interests winning out against starkly different values, or the extent to which successive U.S. governments have been willing to sell out American values in pursuit of cheap energy and geopolitical priorities.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, a wide range of other mutual interests have buttressed the U.S.-Saudi core energy-for-security relationship, ranging from a shared opposition to “godless” communism during the Cold War, to extensive cooperation in disrupting and dismantling networks of violent Islamic extremism — at least after al Qaeda began targeting Saudi Arabia in 2003.<sup>3</sup> These shared interests have helped insulate the relationship from

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmons, Alex, Aída Chávez, and Akela Lacy, “Joe Biden, in Departure from Obama Policy, Says He Would Make Saudi Arabia a ‘Pariah,’” *The Intercept*, Nov. 21, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/21/democratic-debate-joe-biden-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the perspectives collected in “Room for Debate: The Treat and Value of Saudi Arabia,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/08/21/the-threat-and-value-of-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>3</sup> Bronson, Rachel, *Thicker than oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

skeptical publics in both countries and allowed the two sides to overcome periodic disputes. U.S. presidents have deployed every legal tool at their disposal to prevent popular legislation from harming the relationship, even as Saudi rulers have clamped down on any domestic dissent that might jeopardize the partnership.

But even though the two countries' current leaders are quite close, the overall bilateral relationship appears more dysfunctional than ever. The U.S. shale revolution, coupled with more flexible global energy markets, has led American policymakers to feel less beholden to traditional energy concerns. The rise of new policy priorities, such as strategic competition with Russia and China, has further undermined the status of Gulf energy security as a "vital" U.S. interest. This, coupled with deep reservations over open-ended military deployments in the region that stem from the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq, has placed clear limits on U.S. security guarantees and made the relationship more vulnerable to domestic U.S. discontent.

### **The Oil Must Flow... But from Where?**

Concerns about disruptions to Persian Gulf energy supplies no longer have an overriding hold on U.S. policymakers. The idea that the region has less of a hold on global energy markets has been raised in ways ranging from boasts by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to measured assessments of how to "right-size" U.S. strategy toward the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>4</sup> This is a surprising development, given that energy security has long been

---

<sup>4</sup> "Pompeo Calls on Oil Industry to Support U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda," *Reuters*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ceraweek-energy-pompeo-speech/pompeo-calls-on-oil-industry-to-support-us-foreign-policy-agenda-idUSKBN1QT32U>; Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's

cited as a core motivation for U.S. involvement in the Middle East — and for the close U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia. Arab producers' deployment of the "oil weapon" in 1973–74, intended to pressure the United States over its support for Israel, entrenched policymakers' fears of sky-high oil prices and absolute shortages.<sup>5</sup> These concerns were ultimately enshrined in the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which deemed Gulf energy supplies a "vital interest of the United States" that would be defended by force. Even among Gulf producers, Saudi Arabia's ability to rapidly "swing" production levels up or down, and its enormous production levels overall, marked out the country as a paramount partner in U.S. energy security. The kingdom's role in global energy markets is key to its aspirations of great (economic) power status, with some U.S. commentary going so far as to argue that Saudi Arabia has "the energy equivalent of nuclear weapons."<sup>6</sup>

While low energy prices remain a strategic goal for U.S. policymakers, U.S. politicians and security scholars have questioned the cost-effectiveness of an open-ended security commitment to the Gulf.<sup>7</sup> This shift traces back to the slow diffusion of the idea that expanded energy production in the United States (and more flexible markets the world

---

Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January/February 2019): 92, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>.

<sup>5</sup> The price increase likely resulted from speculation in oil markets rather from an actual shortage of supply. Roger J. Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in US Foreign Policy, 1908–97," *Security Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 216–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1171967>.

<sup>6</sup> Edward L. Morse and James Richard. "The Battle for Energy Dominance," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 20, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2002-03-01/battle-energy-dominance>.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Louis Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, eds., *Crude strategy: Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016); "Too Much Oil on Their Minds: The Shale Revolution and U.S. Policy Towards the Gulf," *Masarat*, no. 42, September 5, 2019, 13–17.

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>



over) frees the country from past policy constraints, or at least affords it greater leeway in balancing Gulf energy interests against other strategic priorities. Even in 2013, U.S. National Security Advisor Tom Donilon argued that increasing oil production “affords us a stronger hand in pursuing and implementing our international security goals,” highlighting oil-related sanctions on Iran as a key example.<sup>8</sup>

This “stronger hand” has clearly affected evaluations of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Following the assassination of Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi state in October 2018, a column signed by Saudi media figure Turki Al-Dakhil (and echoed by the Saudi foreign ministry) warned of “catastrophic scenarios” in the event of any U.S. sanctions in response, such as oil prices “jumping to \$100 [a barrel], or \$200, or even twice that figure.”<sup>9</sup> Where they bothered to comment on these references to the “oil weapon,” however, U.S. officials and analysts generally scoffed at Saudi Arabia’s ability to impose meaningful costs or to follow through on its threats.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> “Remarks by Tom Donilon, National Security Advisor to the President at the Launch of Columbia University’s Center on Global Energy Policy,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, April 24, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/24/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisor-president-launch-columbia->.

<sup>9</sup> Aldakhil, Turki. “US Sanctions on Riyadh Would Mean Washington Is Stabbing Itself,” *Al Arabiya*, Oct. 14, 2018, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/10/14/OPINION-US-sanctions-on-Riyadh-means-Washington-is-stabbing-itself.html>; “Saudi Arabia Says It Will Respond to Any Action Taken Against It with a ‘Greater Reaction,’” *Arab News*, Oct. 12, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1387506>.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Wald, “Saudi Arabia Has No Leverage,” *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-economy-united-states.html>; Andrew Miller and Sahar Nowrouzadeh, “Saudi Arabia’s Empty Oil Threats,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 1, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-11-01/saudi-arabias-empty-oil-threats>.

Indeed, the United States offered little response to threats against Gulf oil supplies throughout the summer of 2018. In response to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, the Islamic Republic, or at least the proxy groups it supports, first attacked shipping lanes in the Straits of Hormuz and then took half of Saudi oil exports offline with a strike on oil refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais. Despite the fact that the United States is still more directly reliant on Gulf imports than it was in 1980, the Trump administration backed away from a confrontation with Iran and instead called for other importing nations to help secure Hormuz.<sup>11</sup> The clear implication for many commentators was that the Carter Doctrine was a dead letter. No longer would Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries enjoy de facto ally status, as an attack on any of them was no longer considered a direct attack on the interests of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

## Defense of a Realm

The U.S. valuation of its interests in the region has declined relative to the "unipolar moment" of the early 1990s and the successful rollback of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, particularly during the past decade.<sup>13</sup> Despite the enormous destruction wrought

---

<sup>11</sup> Peter Baker, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Crowley, "An Abrupt Move That Stunned Aides: Inside Trump's Aborted Attack on Iran," *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/us/politics/trump-iran-decision.html>; Diana Stancy Correll, "Trump Questions Need for U.S. to Protect International Shipping in Strait of Hormuz," *Military Times*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2019/06/24/trump-questions-need-for-us-to-protect-international-shipping-in-strait-of-hormuz/>.

<sup>12</sup> Hal Brands, Steven Cook, and Kenneth Pollack, "RIP the Carter Doctrine, 1980-2019," *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 13, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/15/carter-doctrine-rip-donald-trump-mideast-oil-big-think/>.

<sup>13</sup> This period generally serves as a benchmark for U.S. demonstration of credible commitments to regional security partners. Steven A. Cook, "This Is the Moment That Decides the Future of the Middle East,"

by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump have pursued (however haphazardly) a minimalist strategy of “violence management” for overseas conflicts.<sup>14</sup> U.S. policymakers trying to limit the country’s commitments in the region have correspondingly become more reliant on regional partners, especially Saudi Arabia, to achieve regional policy aims, particularly as the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council have largely avoided the civil conflict and political turmoil that have undermined the standing of traditional diplomatic heavyweights in the region.<sup>15</sup> Even with the cornerstone of the U.S.-Saudi relationship weakened, there are no clear alternatives to engaging and coordinating with Saudi Arabia in pursuit of other U.S. security goals in the region, such as counter-terrorism operations, nonproliferation, and, relatedly, limiting Iran’s regional influence.<sup>16</sup>

No amount of shared security aims, however, can compensate for dropping overseas energy security (and Gulf security concerns more broadly) as a “vital interest” of the United States. The Obama administration, for example, in prioritizing efforts to curb Iranian nuclear proliferation, erred considerably on the side of avoiding a direct

---

*Foreign Policy*, Sept. 17, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/17/this-is-the-moment-that-decides-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Staniland, “The U.S. military Is Trying to Manage Foreign Conflicts — not Resolve Them. Here’s Why,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/16/the-u-s-military-isnt-trying-to-resolve-foreign-conflicts-but-manage-them-heres-why/>.

<sup>15</sup> Tarek Masoud, “Has the Door Closed on Arab Democracy?,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 74-87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0013>; Marc Lynch, “The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today’s Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September-October 2018): 116-32, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-08-13/new-arab-order>.

<sup>16</sup> I set aside shared counter-terrorism interests since there is little disagreement here — even the most strident anti-Yemen War legislation included carveouts for intelligence coordination against violent extremism in Yemen and elsewhere.

confrontation with Iran in Syria or Iraq, an unforgivable surrender of American power and influence in the eyes of many Gulf governments.<sup>17</sup> Although Saudi officials welcomed the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, the administration has not laid out a strategy for preventing Iran from lashing out in response. Trump has proven scarcely more willing than Obama to use force to contain Iran, even though he has surrounded himself with officials who would gladly do so.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of building on the nonproliferation aspects of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to reduce Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia now finds itself in the position of having to negotiate with Iran without much leverage, even as its regional partners such as the United Arab Emirates reach out to Tehran.<sup>19</sup> Despite feting Trump with a red carpet and “glowing-orb” treatment in his first visit abroad, signing hundreds of billions in arms deals, and lending tacit support to the Trump administration's pursuit of a “Deal of the Century” regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, Saudi overtures to the Trump administration have been more successful at insulating the kingdom from U.S. domestic criticism than in getting Washington to demonstrate its security commitments

---

<sup>17</sup> One Saudi diplomat described the deal in private as “extremely dangerous.” Loveday Morris and Hugh Naylor, “Arab States Fear Nuclear Deal Will Give Iran a Bigger Regional Role,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/arab-states-fear-dangerous-iranian-nuclear-deal-will-shake-up-region/2015/07/14/96d68ff3-7fce-4bf5-9170-6bcc9dfe46aa\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/arab-states-fear-dangerous-iranian-nuclear-deal-will-shake-up-region/2015/07/14/96d68ff3-7fce-4bf5-9170-6bcc9dfe46aa_story.html).

<sup>18</sup> Baker et al., “An Abrupt Move.”

<sup>19</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan: Threat of Saudi-Iran War Subsiding Due to Diplomacy by Islamabad,” VOA, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/pakistan-threat-saudi-iran-war-subsiding-due-diplomacy-islamabad>; Imad Harb, “Why the United Arab Emirates Is Abandoning Saudi Arabia in Yemen,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/01/why-the-united-arab-emirates-is-abandoning-saudi-arabia-in-yemen/>.

through the use of force.<sup>20</sup> This has been noted by commentators in the kingdom, Saudi regional partners, and Saudi enemies alike.<sup>21</sup>

True, the U.S. assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 raised hopes among some of these same commentators that the Trump administration was willing to use force to confront Iran after all. However, it also underscored the fact that — at least for this president — the death of an American soldier or contractor is a red line in the way that Gulf energy security is not. Trump did respond to the attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais as well as other escalations in the Gulf by expanding the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region. This is far from nothing, given the troubled history of U.S. troop deployments to the kingdom and the potential for a lethal attack on U.S. troops to trigger renewed U.S. interventions. In all, however, there appear to be limits to the direct support Saudi Arabia can expect from even a quite sympathetic administration.

## A Question of Values

This more fraught security relationship lays bare the lack of any popular constituency for Saudi Arabia within the United States, limiting the ability of U.S. policymakers to protect

---

<sup>20</sup> David Kirkpatrick and Ben Hubbard, “Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities Tests U.S. Guarantee to Defend Gulf,” *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/world/middleeast/saudi-iran-attack-oil.html>.

<sup>21</sup> In Saudi Arabia: Ḥamud Abu Tālib, “La ḥalif lina ’ila nahnu [We have no allies but ourselves],” *Okaz*, no. 18 September 2019; “His inaction gave a green light to this,” said Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, quoted in, Kirkpatrick and Hubbard, “Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities”; Farnaz Fassihi and David Kirkpatrick, “Iranian Force Exults in Downing of U.S. Drone With a Feast and a Prayer,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/22/world/middleeast/iran-drone-revolutionary-guards.html>.

the kingdom from domestic pushback over ideological differences. For decades, the major point of friction between the two countries has been the Saudi government's historic promotion of an austere form of orthodox Sunni Islam at home as well as abroad. Viewed as an asset during the Cold War fight against "godless" communist republics, the kingdom's Islamic ideology became a major liability in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Suspicions of Saudi complicity in the attacks, however unfounded, spurred congressional and executive action to rein in terrorism financing from individuals in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf. Concerns about Saudi Arabia "exporting" Wahhabism by funding mosques and schools abroad became a key talking point across the U.S. political spectrum, one that continues to resurface.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, the authoritarianism of the Saudi regime has historically posed little concern for U.S. foreign policy. The relationship is often held up as a triumph of realism, in which even an absolute monarchy and a democracy founded (at least in part) on the principle of *rejecting* the arbitrary rule of kings could make common cause against foreign foes — the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Islamic Republic of Iran thereafter.<sup>23</sup> Successive U.S. administrations have worked to shield the security relationship from U.S. domestic politics, albeit in exchange for demonstrated Saudi progress on combatting terrorism and meaningful, if minor, concessions on the kingdom's most visible abuses of human rights.

---

<sup>22</sup> Scott Shane, "Saudis and Extremism: 'Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,'" *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>.

<sup>23</sup> "What links the two is not values, but interests. Those interests are substantial, and they have sustained a productive and mutually beneficial relationship for decades." F. Gregory Gause III, "Understanding the Gulf States," *Democracy*, no. 36 (Spring 2015), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/36/understanding-the-gulf-states/>.

The past five years have undoubtedly seen marked progress on the moderation of social values within the kingdom. Since 2016, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's Vision 2030 reforms — dramatically curtailing the powers of the kingdom's religious police, easing the sharp gender divides and the worst of Saudi Arabia's discriminatory guardianship laws, and opening up the kingdom to Western entertainment and visitors like — have seemed to deliver on some of the hopes of U.S. observers.<sup>24</sup> The resulting impact on Saudi society has been profound, opening up new opportunities that few would have predicted just half a decade ago and general breathing room to a country governed by reactionary social restrictions for decades.

The implicit promise of the crown prince's reforms is that he is ultimately more Deng Xiaoping than Mikhail Gorbachev, that the monarchy can diversify its economy and alter its ideological basis of legitimacy without conceding any new political freedoms. Yet concerns about Saudi human rights abuses at home and abroad have crescendoed over the past year, especially as they relate to the dire humanitarian situation that has resulted from the conflict in Yemen, and the crackdown on activists within the kingdom, both of which are closely associated with the rise to power of bin Salman.

Regarding the conflict in Yemen, Saudi diplomats and successive U.S. administrations have manifestly failed to convince the American people about the purpose of the coalition's presence and its plan for a successful resolution. The coalition's conduct of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>; Dennis Ross, "America Should Get Behind Saudi Arabia's Revolutionary Crown Prince," *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/12/america-should-get-behind-saudi-arabias-revolutionary-crown-prince/>; Karen Elliott House, "This Is Not Your Father's Saudi Arabia," *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/this-is-not-your-fathers-saudi-arabia-1498085013>.



war is increasingly seen as indefensible on Capitol Hill and among the American public, with Saudi Arabia being the most public face of the coalition. Concerns over the mounting civilian death toll and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, in addition to suspicions of the coalition's deliberate targeting of Yemeni civilians and infrastructure, have spurred considerable mobilization in opposition to U.S. assistance and arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition. Even before the murder of Khashoggi, in fact, there had been bipartisan criticism of Saudi actions.<sup>25</sup> Obama administration officials who initially rationalized their support for the conflict as a way to “compensate” Saudi Arabia for the Iran nuclear deal, have now backed away from these positions, while even the United Arab Emirates has sought to distance itself from the conflict.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, only credible Saudi efforts to demonstrate a commitment to resolving the conflict helped ease some of the pressure on Capitol Hill.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> While the Houthi-controlled government in Sana'a is likewise responsible for inflicting considerable pain and suffering on Yemeni civilians, by spreading wide fields of land mines, torturing activists and opponents, and blocking or diverting aid shipments, this is beside the point so far as the U.S.-Saudi relationship is concerned. U.S. politicians are concerned with the reputational damage and public outcry over the damage dealt by the Saudi-led coalition, not whether this damage is relatively more or less than the suffering caused by the Houthis. David Klion, “When Will Washington End the Forever War?” *The Nation*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/yemen-israel-palestine-washington-war-powers/>; On coalition targeting of civilians, see Mundy, Martha. “The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial bombardment and food war,” *World Peace Foundation*, The Fletcher School (Tufts University), October 2018.

<https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2018/10/Strategies-of-Coalition-in-Yemen-War-Final-20181005-1.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ben Rhodes and Jake Sullivan, “How to Check Trump and Repair America’s Image,” *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/25/opinion/a-chance-to-repair-americas-image-abroad.html>; Alexandra Stark, “Mohammed bin Salman’s Collapsing Coalition in Yemen Means Trouble for Trump,” *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/23/mohammed-bin-salmans-coalition-in-yemen-is-collapsing-that-means-trouble-for-trump-uae-saudi-arabia-aden/>.

<sup>27</sup> Following a visit to Saudi Arabia in September 2019, Sen. Todd Young (a leading Republican critic of the Yemen War) noted that “The Saudis understand that they need to bring that conflict in Yemen to a political



The Saudi government has further undermined its standing by instituting a crackdown against even the mildest forms of dissent. To be sure, none of this is a new practice for the Saudi government. In the past, wayward royals have been kidnapped abroad, while activists from the Eastern Province have been imprisoned or executed on dubious judicial grounds. Even before bin Salman's grand tour of the United States in 2018, Khashoggi had fled into exile in the United States and warned of a crackdown on "those who dare to express opinions contrary to those of my country's leadership."<sup>28</sup> While the arrest of independent religious clerics attracted some attention, and the imprisonment of prominent businessmen and royals in the Ritz-Carlton hotel provoked considerable intrigue, things kicked into high gear once the Saudi state began arresting figures tailor-made to be sympathetic to the American public and to D.C.-based policymakers. On the eve of the country finally granting women the right to drive, for example, a host of women's rights activists were taken into custody, ensuring that every English-language outlet covering women driving would highlight the contradiction.

Capping all of this was the murder of Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. His killing, and the confused series of explanations offered by the Saudi government, shone a spotlight on human rights concerns in Saudi Arabia, in part because Khashoggi was a personal friend of many U.S. politicians, analysts, officials, and academics, and in part because of the gruesome manner in which he was killed. The

---

resolution, and they strike me as dedicated toward doing whatever they can to make that happen." Walter Russell Mead, "Transcript: A Conversation with U.S. Sen. Todd Young," Hudson Institute, Nov. 20, 2019. <https://www.hudson.org/research/15488-transcript-a-conversation-with-u-s-sen-todd-young>.

<sup>28</sup> Jamal Khashoggi, "Saudi Arabia Wasn't Always this Repressive. Now It's Unbearable," *Washington Post*, Sept. 18, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/09/18/saudi-arabia-wasnt-always-this-repressive-now-its-unbearable/>.

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

murder super-charged efforts to reshape the U.S.-Saudi relationship on the left, making it all but impossible for Democratic politicians to publicly defend the kingdom. Indeed, it even drew criticism from avowedly pro-Trump Republicans such as Sen. Lindsey Graham. Public opinion of the kingdom took a hit as well, with Gallup favorability ratings returning to immediately post-9/11 levels.<sup>29</sup>

The Trump administration has thus far offered an ironclad defense of the kingdom, shielding it and its leadership from any short-term restrictions on arms sales or U.S. investigations into human rights violations. Yet this stance has strained U.S. policymakers' remaining goodwill toward the kingdom, with even Republicans balking.<sup>30</sup> The idea that "independent" state institutions in Saudi Arabia are investigating the murder and other human rights concerns is not taken seriously within the United States. It is now hard to imagine the crown prince visiting the kingdom's most important security partner without sparking mass protests.<sup>31</sup>

As with everything in the United States today, party polarization will further complicate even a transactional security relationship, especially if a progressive Democratic administration takes power in the near future. As it stands, every single candidate for the Democratic nomination opposes U.S. involvement in the war in Yemen. For those on the left, "getting tough" with Saudi Arabia will be a key means of demonstrating a

---

<sup>29</sup> "Country Ratings," Gallup, accessed Oct. 12, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Leber, "Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Congress: Cooperation and Opposition since 9/11," *Dirasat*, no. 44 (April 2019): 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> Even a visit to Tunisia led to demonstrations. Tarek Amara, "Tunisian Activists Protest Against Saudi Crown Prince Visit," *Reuters*, Nov. 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-saudi-tunisia/tunisian-activists-protest-against-saudi-crown-prince-visit-idUSKCN1NV1HX>.

commitment to a “principled” foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, any progressive insistence on representative government as an essential component of long-term political stability will inevitably clash with the kingdom’s preference for using deeply repressive security apparatuses as a tool of social control within the region.<sup>33</sup>

Some might, therefore, view the downturn in U.S. opinion toward Saudi Arabia as simply a projection of anti-Trump sentiments that will fade with the close of the present election cycle. Even among Republicans, however, there is some evidence that Trump’s lenient approach to the kingdom has diminished support for Saudi Arabia.<sup>34</sup> Republican support is not guaranteed to protect the kingdom: Legislation targeting the war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia’s human rights record during 2018 and 2019 represented a rare bipartisan cause in Congress. Even Trump administration officials placed calls to senior officials in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to curb support for Sudanese security services willing to open fire on civilian protesters.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Evan Hill, “Our Special Relationship with Saudi Arabia Needs To End,” *Buzzfeed News*, Oct. 12, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/evanhill/end-special-relationship-with-saudi-arabia-khashoggi>;

Christopher Murphy, “How to Make a Progressive Foreign Policy Actually Work,” *The Atlantic*, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/senator-chris-murphy-progressive-foreign-policy/599470/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Policy Roundtable: The Future of Progressive Foreign Policy,” *Texas National Security Review*, Dec. 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>34</sup> Leber, “Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Congress,” 25.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Undersecretary of State David Hale, quoted in, “Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa’s Horn.”

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The U.S.-Saudi relationship has become marked by diverging expectations and a transactional dynamic.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, this could all conceivably change in the event of a major energy crisis that truly shocks global markets and inflicts sharp costs on U.S. consumers. For now, though, it would be more effective to focus on actions that can keep the U.S.-Saudi partnership on a relatively even keel, rather than advocating for an ever more expansive U.S. military presence in the Gulf and a permissive approach toward Gulf partners' behavior that is unlikely to receive broad American domestic support.

U.S. policymakers, then, must clearly communicate what they expect out of the relationship and what they are willing to offer in return. If U.S. officials view the war in Yemen as a dangerous distraction from other security concerns and a mounting humanitarian catastrophe, then they should say so clearly, just as the late Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal warned the Bush administration against intervention in Iraq. Likewise, if American officials are fundamentally unable or unwilling to utilize force to secure energy supplies in the region, then they should state this clearly in private. Security engagement with the region should be based on boosting diplomatic efforts in the region and developing Saudi defensive capabilities, rather than selling the kingdom nearly limitless supplies of sophisticated arms and munitions for which it has little practical use.

---

<sup>36</sup> Mansour Almarzoqi has advanced a similar argument in Saudi Arabia, albeit placing more emphasis on the effect of great-power dynamics on the relationship. "Al-'alaqat al-s'audiyya – al-amrikiyya bayna qimatayy 1945 wa 2015," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, Sept. 10, 2015.

Second, U.S. officials should recognize — as many already do — that completely insulating the U.S.-Saudi relationship from U.S. concerns over political freedoms and human rights will only weaken it in the long run. Saudi officials cannot be led to believe that the security partnership will fully protect them from U.S. censure over the country's domestic politics or its conduct abroad. The behavior of the Saudi government, and the unwillingness or inability of the Trump administration to secure meaningful concessions in the face of criticism, has generated a political backlash that would likely constrain even a moderate Democratic president such as Biden. The same goes for areas of joint U.S. and Saudi involvement in the broader region. The United States should draw clear red lines regarding political freedoms and human rights where possible, as in Sudan, and be willing to offer something in return, such as removing Sudan from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism (which Saudi Arabia has called for).

Third, U.S. engagement on a personal and personnel level should be both broader and deeper in the years to come. The personalization of the relationship, between Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner on the one hand and the crown prince on the other, has drawn the kingdom into a thicket of questions and investigations about the president mixing personal interest and the national interest. Even for Saudi Arabia, the policy gains do not seem worth the reputational risk. Managing a more arms-length security partnership requires not a melding of the minds between a few close individuals, but a range of U.S. officials familiar with the language, concerns, and present-day dynamics of the kingdom who can engage with Saudi counterparts at various levels of government on their own terms.

Finally, a degree of empathy will go a long way toward making the most of a more transactional relationship. U.S. officials can speak from their country's own experience with disastrous interventions, rather than from a position of moral superiority, in

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

counseling Saudi counterparts toward a peaceful solution in Yemen. They can likewise strike a balance between measured praise of welcome legal and social changes, on the one hand, and specific criticisms of shortcomings in human rights and political freedoms on the other. And rather than expressing shock and dismay whenever Saudi Arabia courts weapons or communications technology from China, in a bid for a closer relationship with a country that presents a model of authoritarian rule coupled with an advanced economy and great-power status, officials should patiently explain that a partnership with Washington affords leeway for strategic disagreements without threat of reprisals, unlike the relationships of dependency that Beijing cultivates.<sup>37</sup>

*Andrew Leber is a PhD Candidate at Harvard University's Department of Government.*



---

<sup>37</sup> Azeem Ibraheem, "China Has No Room for Dissenting Friends," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 4, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/04/silence-xinjiang-hong-kong-protests-china-allies/>.

## 2. The End of the Middle East's Primacy in U.S. Foreign Policy

*Andrew Miller*

The Middle East has spent the three decades since the end of the Cold War at the center of American foreign policy. In the last several years, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the region's importance to U.S. national security has been on the decline, both in absolute terms and relative to other parts of the world. Yet, as Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump have discovered, the Middle East may be less important, but it is not inconsequential. The United States simply does not have the luxury of ignoring the region, however tempting that may seem at times. One of the primary challenges for American strategy will thus be to find a way to rationalize, and in some cases reduce, the U.S. commitment to the Middle East without forfeiting influence over regional issues that still matter to the United States. This process will not be smooth or linear, and the discipline it will require is somewhat uncharacteristic of the U.S. government. Nevertheless, American foreign policy should not remain stuck in the past any longer.

### Traditional U.S. Interests in the Region

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the bipolar struggle for global supremacy, the U.S. national security establishment was in search of a new *raison d'être*.<sup>38</sup> While the administrations of both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were seized with perceived opportunities to create a freer international order, the Middle East rapidly

---

<sup>38</sup> James Schlesinger, "Quest for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.1 (1992): 17-28, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1993-02-01/quest-post-cold-war-foreign-policy>.

emerged as a potential spoiler to these plans. Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait during the waning days of the Soviet Union not only presented the first test of the new post-Cold War order, but it posed a severe threat to global oil supplies, which were critical to the global economy and the promise of shared economic growth.<sup>39</sup> Though the United States was able to build a vast international coalition that quickly ejected Iraq from Kuwait, the incident underscored that the Middle East was both a region of importance to the United States and one where U.S. interests could not be taken for granted.

In addition to oil, other American interests were clearly implicated in the Middle East. Transit through the region, which is situated at the intersection of three continents and abreast major waterways, was crucial to international trade. The U.S. military viewed its ability to transport equipment, materiel, and personnel safely through the Middle East as a strategic necessity for global power projection.<sup>40</sup> Israel was another high-level U.S. priority in the region. While Israel's strategic importance to the United States was then, and remains to this day, a hotly-debated topic, broad American public support for Israel ensured that the country's security was treated as a core U.S. interest. Countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and then in Iran was another persistent U.S. interest at play in the Middle East during these years. And, of course, terrorism emanating from the region became an increasingly prominent U.S. concern throughout the 1990s, only to transform into the central threat to U.S. interests in the world with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

---

<sup>39</sup> James Addison Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

<sup>40</sup> "Leveraging U.S. Power in the Middle East," CAP Middle East Team, Center for American Progress (October 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2016/10/19/146283/leveraging-u-s-power-in-the-middle-east/>.



For these reasons, the Middle East was undoubtedly among a small set of issues that dominated U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. The region's primacy in U.S. foreign policy can best be observed not through the national security strategies of the time or any other formal pronouncements, but instead by the enormous resources invested in the region. Since 1990, the U.S. military has had at least 10,000 troops (and as many as 231,000) stationed permanently in the Middle East in all but five of those years.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11, 2.5 million military members served in the greater Middle East (including Afghanistan),<sup>42</sup> sustaining nearly 7,000 deaths.<sup>43</sup> From 2001 to 2014, the United States spent the vast majority of an astonishing \$1.84 trillion in supplementary defense funding appropriated for the erstwhile-named "Global War on Terror" in the greater Middle East.<sup>44</sup> In the same period, \$59.7 billion of Foreign Military Financing funding and \$23.8 billion of the Economic Support Fund, the two major strategic aid programs, was committed to the Middle East and North Africa, consuming 62 percent of all funding in these accounts.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> "DoD Personnel, Workforce Reports & Publications," Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed Oct. 31, 2019, [https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp\\_reports.jsp](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp).

<sup>42</sup> Chris Adams, "Millions Went to War in Iraq, Afghanistan, Leaving Many with Lifelong Scars," McClatchy DC Bureau, March 14, 2013, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/article24746680.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Neta C. Crawford, "Human Cost of the Post-9/11 Wars: Lethality and the Need for Transparency," Costs of War Project, November 2018, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2018/Human%20Costs%2C%20Nov%208%202018%20CoW.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Brendan W. McGarry and Emily Morgenstern, "Overseas Contingency Operations Funding: Background and Status," Congressional Research Service, Sept. 6, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44519.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> "ForeignAssistance.gov," accessed Oct. 31, 2019, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/>.

## The Middle East's Declining Importance

Thirty years into the post-Cold War period and nearly 20 years after 9/11, the U.S. commitment to the Middle East remains extensive. As of September 2019, there were between 60,000 and 70,000 U.S. military members stationed in the region.<sup>46</sup> The Department of Defense estimates that it will need to spend \$30 billion annually to sustain a forward presence and operational readiness in the region.<sup>47</sup> In Fiscal Year 2018, countries in the Middle East received 86 percent and 42 percent of global Foreign Military Financing and Economic Support Fund funds, respectively.<sup>48</sup> Under its security cooperation programs, the Defense Department is requesting nearly \$7 billion for Central Command in Fiscal Year 2020, a request that is 10 times larger than that for the next biggest combatant command.<sup>49</sup> Based on this level of commitment to the region, it is clear that the Middle East remains at the very center of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

---

<sup>46</sup> Rashaan Ayesh, "Where U.S. troops and military assets are deployed in the Middle East," *Axios*, Sept. 21, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/where-us-troops-deployed-middle-east-5e96fdb2-c7ba-4f26-90b4-7bf452f83847.html>. Pentagon officials sometimes cite a lower figure — 50,000 troops — but that estimate can be attributed to creative accounting designed to undercount the U.S. presence.

<sup>47</sup> Melissa Dalton and Mara Karlin, "It's long past time to rethink U.S. military posture in the Gulf," Brookings Institution, Aug. 4, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/04/its-long-past-time-to-rethink-u-s-military-posture-in-the-gulf/>.

<sup>48</sup> "Congressional Budget Justification - Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2020," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FY-2020-CBJ-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> "Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 President's Budget Justification for Security Cooperation Program and Activity Funding." Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 2019, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/FY2020\\_Security\\_Cooperation\\_Book\\_FINAL.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/FY2020_Security_Cooperation_Book_FINAL.pdf).

The continued wisdom of attaching such a high priority to the Middle East is, however, increasingly questionable due to two ongoing changes.<sup>50</sup> First, the importance of other regions to the United States is on the rise. The emergence of “near-peer” competitors — Russia and China in particular — requires more U.S. attention,<sup>51</sup> which the 2018 National Defense Strategy recognizes, even though the Trump administration has not yet adjusted resource commitments to reflect this new priority.<sup>52</sup> The Chinese economy is rapidly approaching the size of the American economy and, due to a decades-long modernization drive, China’s military looks increasingly formidable.<sup>53</sup> Even as Russia’s national resources dwindle, Moscow has proved adept at undermining American interests abroad, as well as American democracy at home. Beyond these “great powers,” the world’s most dynamic economies are located in East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America — not the Middle East. In short, relative to the Middle East, other countries and regions are becoming more important to U.S. interests.

The second change that bears on the U.S. commitment to the Middle East is an absolute decline in the region’s importance to the United States. To be sure, the United States still

---

<sup>50</sup> Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January/February 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>. Karlin and Wittes explore the changing importance of the Middle East to the United States in their important article, which has generated a much-needed debate about U.S. interests in the region.

<sup>51</sup> Jim Garamone, “Dunford Discusses Near-Peer Competition, Keeping U.S. Military Edge.” U.S. Department of Defense, Dec. 6, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1707188/dunford-discusses-near-peer-competition-keeping-us-military-edge/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Paul McCleary, “Pentagon: Chinese Military Modernization Enters ‘New Phase,’” *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/13/pentagon-chinese-military-modernization-enters-new-phase/>.

has important interests in the region. But there is no escaping the fact that they are simply not as crucial to U.S. security or to the global economy as they once were. For instance, while the notion that it has achieved “energy independence” is misguided, the United States is less vulnerable to interruptions in the supply of Middle Eastern oil.<sup>54</sup> Disruptions can still drive up the global price of oil, as was demonstrated by the September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities and recent U.S. hostilities with Iran, and this can be damaging to the world economy.<sup>55</sup> Yet, with the United States now the world’s largest crude oil producer, the gas station lines that plagued American consumers in the 1970s are now only a remote possibility.<sup>56</sup> Saudi Arabia’s status as the world’s swing oil producer (the country with spare production capacity that can manipulate global prices) is, moreover, being eroded by rising domestic consumption and Saudi fears that increasing oil prices could undercut the kingdom’s market share.<sup>57</sup> Middle Eastern oil producers are, therefore, no longer in as strong a position to use the “oil weapon” to undermine U.S. security, and while the loss of regional oil supplies would certainly hurt the global economy, it would no longer cripple it.

---

<sup>54</sup> Jason Bordoff, “The Myth of U.S. Energy Independence Has Gone Up in Smoke,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 18, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/18/the-myth-of-u-s-energy-independence-has-gone-up-in-smoke/>.

<sup>55</sup> Bill Chappel, Richard Gonzales, and Scott Neuman, “Attack On Saudi Oil Facilities Makes Oil Prices Spike,” NPR, Sept. 16, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/16/761118726/oil-prices-jump-following-drone-attack-on-saudi-oil-facility>; Matt O’Brien, “Oil Price Keeps Rising as Industry Eyes US-Iran Conflict,” *Associated Press*, Jan. 6, 2020, <https://apnews.com/c552a9b1a14be2ebf32a21ebd1f9506c>.

<sup>56</sup> “The United States Is now the Largest Global Crude Oil Producer,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, Sept. 12, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37053>.

<sup>57</sup> Clifford Krauss and Stanley Reed, “Prices Are Down, but Saudis Keep Oil Flowing,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/01/business/energy-environment/prices-are-down-but-saudis-keep-oil-flowing.html>.

While the Middle East still occupies a strategic geographical position, the ability to move military assets and commercial goods through the region has become less critical. The growing promise of longer ice-free seasons in the Arctic presents an alternative to Middle East-centric trade routes.<sup>58</sup> With a surge in port construction in Africa, there are now substitutes for transshipment ports like Dubai.<sup>59</sup> The value of reliable transit through the Middle East was always predicated on the need to supply ongoing U.S. military operations in countries like Iraq and Syria, or further afield in Central Asia. As the United States draws down its involvement in these conflicts, however, transportation throughout the region will decline in priority. Transit through the Middle East could, under certain circumstances, still prove valuable in responding to security threats in East Asia, but this would amount to a convenience, not a necessity.

Terrorism remains one of the primary concerns of the American public, with 73 percent of Americans in a 2018 poll calling it a “top priority” for the United States.<sup>60</sup> But, in contrast to the febrile years immediately following 9/11, there is a growing appreciation that Middle Eastern terrorism does not pose an existential threat to the United States or its interests. Commentators have lamented what they describe as “the counterterrorism industrial complex,” a network of “new government agencies, private firms and an army of well-funded experts” whose overweening focus on counterterrorism has warped U.S. foreign

---

<sup>58</sup> Richard Boxshall, “Winds of Change? How the Middle East Can Respond to Shifts in Global Trade Patterns,” PricewaterhouseCoopers, May 23, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Francois-Xavier Delenclos, et al., “Will Middle Eastern Ports Continue to Succeed?” Boston Consulting Group, July 19, 2018, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/will-middle-eastern-ports-continue-succeed.aspx>.

<sup>60</sup> “Economic Issues Decline Among Public’s Policy Priorities,” Pew Research Center, Jan. 25, 2018, <https://www.people-press.org/2018/01/25/economic-issues-decline-among-publics-policy-priorities/>.

policy.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, it is domestic rightwing and homegrown Islamist terrorism — albeit inspired by groups native to the Middle East — that appear to constitute bigger security threats to the American homeland than the 9/11-style plots conceived in the greater Middle East.<sup>62</sup> The reality is that Americans are more likely to be killed in accidents involving a bathtub, home appliance, or a deer than in a terrorist attack.<sup>63</sup> Of course, an American president does not want to be perceived as giving short shrift to counterterrorism — as Obama discovered when he tried to put the terrorism threat in proportion.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, reassuring the American public about the U.S. government’s counterterrorism efforts need not require the United States to sustain its current level of investment in the Middle East.

Israel’s place in U.S. foreign policy also is changing, whether American support for the Jewish state is attributed to public opinion or strategic considerations. While popular support for Israel in the United States remains robust — 76 percent of Americans view it

---

<sup>61</sup> Jon Finan, and Robert Malley, “How Our Strategy Against Terrorism Gave Us Trump,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/04/opinion/sunday/how-our-strategy-against-terrorism-gave-us-trump.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Bergen, Albert Ford, Alyssa Sims, and David Sterman, “Part IV. What is the Threat to the United States Today?” *New America*, accessed Oct. 31, 2019, <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/>.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Has the Threat of Terrorism in the US Been Blown Out of Proportion,” *World Economic Forum*, Feb. 8, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/02/has-the-threat-of-terrorism-in-the-us-been-blown-out-of-proportion/>.

<sup>64</sup> Marc A. Thiessen, “After Orlando, Obama Continue to Be in Denial About Terrorism,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-orlando-obama-continues-to-be-in-denial-about-terrorism/2016/06/15/c645fb3e-3303-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7ao\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-orlando-obama-continues-to-be-in-denial-about-terrorism/2016/06/15/c645fb3e-3303-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7ao_story.html).

as a “strategic asset” — it is slowly beginning to erode, particularly among Democrats.<sup>65</sup> In recent polling, the percentage of Democrats who consider Israel to be an ally declined from 31 percent in December 2017 to 24 percent in August 2018, due both to generational changes and highly negative views of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>66</sup> This trend has not yet manifested itself in different U.S. policies, and Democratic attitudes toward Israel may recover if Netanyahu’s premiership comes to an end. But, for the first time in its history, Israel should not take American support for granted, and with it the persistence of the U.S. perception that America must remain engaged in the Middle East for that purpose. Similarly, the strategic case for the United States continuing to support Israel — it is the most capable American partner in the Middle East and also one of only two democracies in the region — is somewhat in flux.<sup>67</sup> To the extent that the Middle East is becoming less important to the United States, it logically will be less critical to have partners in the region.

The only U.S. interest in the Middle East that may have become more significant in recent years is nonproliferation. But this exception is largely the result of U.S. policy itself: Had Trump not withdrawn the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the primary driver of U.S. proliferation concerns in the Middle East — Iran’s nuclear

---

<sup>65</sup> Shibley Telhami, “American Attitudes on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Brookings Institution, Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/american-attitudes-on-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>.

<sup>66</sup> Kathey Frankovic, “When It Comes to Israel, American Views Are Partisan,” *YouGov*, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/international/articles-reports/2019/08/30/israel-american-views-partisan>.

<sup>67</sup> Lee Smith, “Why Israel Is a Strategic Asset to the United States,” *Tablet*, Nov. 9, 2011, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/82803/grand-strategy>.

program — would have been neutralized for at least the next 15 years.<sup>68</sup> As it stands, the best policy to address this self-manufactured security threat may prove to be rejoining the nuclear deal, a relatively cost-free option, rather than investing in resource-intensive military deployments or even a fundamentally new diplomatic initiative.

## Obama, Trump, and Their Failed Recalibrations

While the United States has yet to adjust to the new reality in the Middle East, it is not necessarily for lack of trying. Notwithstanding their deep differences on most issues, Obama and Trump share the distinction of campaigning to withdraw U.S. forces from conflict zones in the Middle East. Both men recognized that the United States was over-committed in the region. And each — in his own way — tried to reduce American investment in the region. The Obama administration sought to “pivot to Asia,” reflecting the president’s belief that in the future the preponderance of U.S. interests would lie in eastern, not western, Asia.<sup>69</sup> Trump, in characteristic hyperbole, has commented that “going into the Middle East is the worst decision ever made in the history of our

---

<sup>68</sup> Kelsey Davenport, “Restrictions on Iran’s Nuclear Program: Beyond 15 Years,” Arms Control Association, Aug. 25, 2015, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2015-08/restrictions-iran%E2%80%99s-nuclear-program-beyond-15-years>.

<sup>69</sup> Victor Cha, “The Unfinished Legacy of Obama’s Pivot to Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 6, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>.



country”<sup>70</sup> and continues to argue that “it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous endless wars.”<sup>71</sup>

Yet, for different reasons, both presidents have been unable to realize a major recalibration of the U.S. commitment to the Middle East. During the Obama administration, efforts to downsize the American investment in the Middle East in a gradual and responsible manner foundered on the region’s realities. The 2011 Arab Spring dominated U.S. foreign and defense policy, leaving less time for Obama to focus on other priorities in Asia and Africa. Though the Obama administration initially succeeded in withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq, the rise of the Islamic State compelled it to deploy forces not only to Iraq but to Syria as well. And, while there were still opportunities to reduce or at least contain U.S. regional commitments to countries such as Egypt and Yemen, Obama too often deferred to his more conservative cabinet members, who warned of cataclysmic consequences in the event that the United States crossed its traditional Middle Eastern partners.<sup>72</sup>

Trump’s chaotic, impulsive drive to disengage from the Middle East has been no more successful. As during the Obama administration, emergent regional security threats, this time Iran’s increasing belligerence, led Trump to deploy thousands of additional U.S. forces to the Middle East — although in this case the new dangers were mostly of the

---

<sup>70</sup> “Sanctions Introduced Against Turkey, Trump Defends Syrian Withdrawal,” *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 9, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/American-Politics/Going-into-the-Middle-East-is-the-worst-decision-ever-made-says-Trump-604095>.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Baker and Laura Jakes, “Trump Throws Middle East Policy Into Turmoil Over Syria,” *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/turkey-syria-trump.html>.

<sup>72</sup> David Kirkpatrick, “The White House and the Strongman,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/27/sunday-review/obama-egypt-coup-trump.html>.

administration's own making.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, each time Trump has tried to downsize the U.S. commitment to the region, the abrupt and uncoordinated nature of his decisions has undermined their implementation. On two separate occasions, Trump has ordered the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria, only to consider leaving a residual presence following an outcry from the national security establishment.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, his administration has squandered a number of opportunities to trim the fat from several regional aid packages, choosing to protect the largest ones for domestic political reasons, while pursuing excessive cuts to other countries.<sup>75</sup> This has provoked Congress to appropriate even more assistance, sometimes regardless of whether recipients required additional aid.<sup>76</sup>

If the experiences of the Obama and Trump administrations underscore the difficulty of scaling down the U.S. commitment to the Middle East, they do not diminish the urgency of doing so. While the United States does not have the luxury of ignoring the Middle East, the region's diminishing importance to U.S. interests is unlikely to be reversed in the near

---

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, "Despite Vow to End 'Endless Wars,' Here's Where About 200,000 Troops Remain," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/middleeast/us-troops-deployments.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Maggie Haberman and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Said to Favor Leaving a Few Hundred Troops in Eastern Syria," *New York Times*, Oct. 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/world/middleeast/trump-troops-syria-turkey.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Seth Binder, Louisa Keeler, and Andrew Miller, "President Trump's Third Foreign Affairs Budget: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa FY20," Project on Middle East Democracy, June 25, 2019, <https://pomed.org/fy20-budget-report/>. While the Trump administration continued to request \$1.3 billion in military aid for Egypt in FY20, an aid package that is supported by the pro-Israel lobby and arms manufacturers, he proposed slashing total aid to Iraq and Tunisia by more than half.

<sup>76</sup> Binder et al., "President Trump's Third Foreign Affairs Budget."

term. Until the Middle East's deep governance pathologies are rectified, it will not present real opportunities for the United States or any other external actor. Meanwhile, China's ability to challenge the United States will only grow further, as its military modernization continues apace and global investments enhance its international influence. Russia's long-term trajectory is far less certain, but Moscow will retain the capacity to interfere with American interests. And as long as the United States remains tied down in the Middle East it will find it hard to grapple effectively with challenges elsewhere in the world. Middle East experts and former U.S. government officials Mara Karlin and Tamara Wittes have aptly described the conundrum of persistent U.S. overcommitment in the region as a "purgatory."<sup>77</sup>

## **Managing a Successful Recalibration of the U.S. Commitment in the Middle East**

The task for U.S. policymakers is to strike a better balance between the American commitment to the Middle East and the realization that the region can still cause harm to the United States. Trump's instinct to cut and run is not the answer — certainly not in the unplanned and hasty way toward which he is predisposed. Nor is it to postpone difficult decisions likely to cause angst with local partners, waiting for a perfect moment at some unspecified future date to do what is so badly needed, a temptation to which Obama sometimes succumbed. The process of recalibrating the U.S. position in the Middle East should begin now, but it must be done strategically. American foreign policy must not only be guided by what the United States can realistically cut back on in the Middle East, but also by how the United States can reduce the need to make large investments in response to future contingencies.

---

<sup>77</sup> Karlin and Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory."

The U.S. force posture in the region, for instance, screams for an economically-minded recalibration. The United States does not require a military presence in 14 regional countries to protect oil supplies, commercial trade routes, or Israel, nor does it need such a presence to counter terrorism and nuclear proliferation.<sup>78</sup> U.S. basing in the region has been determined according to a logic of convenience — not necessity — which has entailed significant financial and opportunity costs. As Melissa Dalton and Mara Karlin argue, the United States can strategically assume some risk by closing select facilities and converting others from hot (continuously manned by the United States) to warm (maintained by host country) bases without jeopardizing core interests.<sup>79</sup> This would not only save money, but also permit a reduction in the number of personnel assigned to the Middle East on a persistent basis. The United States may still need to surge forces to the region in response to an imminent threat, which this arrangement would facilitate, but in the meantime the military can conserve resources, redirecting them to other theaters. U.S. regional partners, particularly in the Gulf, will of course react negatively to a reduced American military presence. But these concerns can be at least partially allayed by reaffirming that the United States is prepared to use force to repel external, as opposed to domestic, threats to the region. And while this commitment is less than U.S. partners would prefer, the reality is that they do not have any alternative to America's security guarantees.

---

<sup>78</sup> Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "America's Presence in the Middle East Has Hardly Changed Under Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 7, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-08-07/enduring-american-presence-middle-east>.

<sup>79</sup> Dalton and Karlin, "Posture."

Similarly, the United States should take a fresh look at how it provides aid to the Middle East. Trump is right that U.S. assistance to the region has often been a poor investment, though not for the reasons he argues.<sup>80</sup> Contrary to the president's statements, the amount of U.S. aid to the Middle East is not excessive — the approximately \$7 billion in State Department funding the Middle East receives is a small fraction of what the United States spends on military operations.<sup>81</sup> And, while aid is routinely used to encourage recipient states to adopt pro-American positions, U.S. assistance also is intended to serve other purposes. Indeed, the primary failure of American aid to the region is that it has not achieved these other goals, such as fostering shared economic and political growth and developing more capable and rights-respecting security services. These goals are well worth the investment, as the emergence in the Middle East of more prosperous societies with competent, representative governments would make all U.S. regional interests easier to achieve. But the U.S. government routinely sacrifices these objectives in the interest of using aid to “build relationships.”<sup>82</sup> As relationships are not an end in themselves, and there is scant evidence that the provision of aid has secured more cooperative behavior from recipient countries, the United States would be better off seeking to condition assistance on the types of institutional reforms that are integral to political, economic, and security progress in the region.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Anne Gearan and Carol Morello, “Trump: U.S. Expenditures in the Middle East Have Been a ‘Mistake.’” *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-us-expenditures-in-middle-east-have-been-a-mistake/2018/02/12/684e7592-1010-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-us-expenditures-in-middle-east-have-been-a-mistake/2018/02/12/684e7592-1010-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html).

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Department of State, “FY2020.”

<sup>82</sup> Nathan J. Lucas and Kathleen J. McInnis, “What Is ‘Building Partner Capacity?’ Issues for Congress.” Congressional Research Service, Dec. 18, 2015, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44313.pdf>.

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Miller and Richard Sokolsky, “What Has \$49 Billion in Foreign Military Aid Bought Us? Not Much,” *American Conservative*, Feb. 27, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/what-has-49-billion-in-foreign-military-aid-bought-us-not-much/>.

Adjusting the U.S. force posture and restructuring aid promises to cut costs in the short term, but neither action will provide protection against a security emergency in the Middle East that draws the United States back into the region. Any U.S. Middle East strategy must therefore be designed to prevent, or at least reduce the risk of, scenarios that require costly American interventions. One such step is clearly defining which security threats warrant U.S. attention, and exercising the discipline not to stray from that definition. The U.S. interest most subject to escalating commitments at the present time is terrorism. While the need for U.S. operations focused on the Islamic State or Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, terrorist groups that have a demonstrated track record of targeting the American homeland, is relatively undisputed, it is less clear when it comes to local terrorist organizations that pose an indirect threat to the United States, such as Al Shabaab.<sup>84</sup> Instead of reflexively joining any battle against Islamist terrorist groups, the United States should consider carefully whether the commitment of resources entailed in any campaign is justified, both in terms of the risk a terrorist group poses to the United States and the opportunity cost of using those resources to address other threats.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Peter Bergen, “How Big of a Threat Is Al-Shabaab to the United States?” CNN, Feb. 22, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/22/opinion/bergen-al-shabaab-threat/index.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Megan Smith and Sean Zeigler, “Terrorism Before and During the War on Terror: A Look at the Numbers,” *War on the Rocks*, Dec. 12, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/terrorism-war-terror-look-numbers/>.

## Conclusion

The Pax Americana in the Middle East, to the extent one ever existed, has clearly passed.<sup>86</sup> U.S. influence in the region has waned, as a variety of actors — internal and external — have asserted themselves and their interests. Though the effect of this competition on the Middle East has been regrettable, it does not pose a serious threat to U.S. interests, which have been on the decline in the region for at least a decade. The United States is no longer a regional hegemon in the Middle East, but Washington does not need unrivaled supremacy in the region to achieve its diminished core interests. Indeed, the United States cannot afford to pursue regional hegemony in the Middle East without compromising its ability to handle emerging threats, such as those emanating from China and Russia.

The time has come for the United States to begin the process of downsizing its commitment to the Middle East to better reflect the region's importance to U.S. global interests. As Obama and Trump have discovered, this process will by no means be easy, but it is unlikely to get any easier over time. If the U.S. government can succeed in putting the Middle East in proportion, the United States will be in a strong position to navigate the challenges of the last three-quarters of the 21st century. But if it fails, U.S. interests across the globe will suffer, and Washington will remain fecklessly mired in the past.

*Andrew Miller is the deputy director for policy at the Project on Middle East Democracy and a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. From 2014*

---

<sup>86</sup> Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The Post-American Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November/December 2015), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/end-pax-americana>.

*to 2017, Andrew served as the Director for Egypt and Israel Military Issues on the National Security Council (NSC), where he was responsible for coordinating U.S. policy towards these countries. He also worked at the Department of State in a variety of policy and analytical roles related to the Middle East, serving in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, on the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff, and at the U.S. embassies in Doha and Cairo.*





### 3. Understanding the Changes in Turkey's Foreign Policy: International Politics, the AKP, and Turkish National Identity

Steven A. Cook

It was inevitable that, after Turkey received the first components of the Russian manufactured S-400 air defense system in July 2019 analysts and journalists would ask: “Who lost Turkey?” On one level, it was an appropriate question. The delivery of the S-400 components, which Turkish television broadcast live from an air base just outside of Ankara, signaled Turkey's increasing divergence from NATO and the United States. A month prior, the outspoken Turkish interior minister, Suleyman Soyly, called Turkey's decision to purchase the system a “declaration of freedom and independence.”<sup>87</sup> On another level, however, the premise of the question reflects ahistorical and static views of Turkey and its foreign relations.

There is a tendency within the foreign policy community to see Turkey in a binary manner: either it is allied to the West or it is “lost.”<sup>88</sup> This view is the legacy of three

---

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Hanife Sevinç, “In 1.5 Months Imamoğlu Lost His Way,” *Anadolu Agency*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/imamoglu-1-5-ayda-rotasini-sasirdi/1500250>.

<sup>88</sup> Micahel Burleigh, “The West Cannot Afford to Lose Turkey,” *The Times of London*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-west-cannot-afford-to-lose-turkey-3fxp62whs>; Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, “Who Lost Turkey?” *Foreign Policy*, July 19, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/19/who-lost-turkey-middle-east-s-400-missile-deal-russia-syria-iraq-kurdish-united-states-nato-alliance-partners-allies-adversaries/>; Blaise Misztal, “Turkey's Turn Against the West — And How to reverse It,” *New York Post*, July 16, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/07/16/turkeys-turn-against-the-west-and-how-to-reverse-it/>; Walter Russell Mead, “Don't Let Turkey Defect to Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dont-let-turkey-defect-to-russia-11563232042>.

things: the founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's determination to orient the Turkish Republic toward the West; Turkey's position as a regional pillar of Western security during the Cold War; and the Turkish effort to join the most exclusive of Western clubs, the European Union. Indeed, beginning in the immediate post-World War II era and the ensuing four decades, there were compelling domestic political and national security reasons for Turkey's alignment with the West.

At the same time, this orientation created a persisting set of myths about Turkey, Turkish society, and the country's foreign policy among Western policymakers and analysts. These ideas are reflected in the way this community of experts has traditionally portrayed Turkey — as “staunchly secular,” a “strategic partner,” and unique among Muslim societies for its democratic practices (now severely compromised) and relative prosperity. This mythology never allowed for the possibility of change, and as Turkey has shifted direction under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), some analysts and officials have concluded that it must be off course and in need of rescuing.

No one, however, “lost” Turkey. The changes in Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades are a function of three related issues: changes in international politics; the emergence and success of the AKP; and the ongoing, unresolved debate within Turkish society about Turkey's identity.<sup>89</sup> Turkey is like any other state; its leaders pursue foreign policy based on their calculations of Turkey's national interests and what is best for officials in Ankara politically. That Turkish foreign policy deviates from the preferences of

---

<sup>89</sup> For a complete discussion of the linkages between contested identity and foreign policy, see, Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Western elites should surprise no one, especially three decades after the end of the Cold War.

## Bigger than Erdogan

In recent years, scholars and other observers have focused considerable attention on Recep Tayyip Erdogan to explain Turkish politics and foreign policy, and for good reason.<sup>90</sup> Since he came to power in 2003, Erdogan has been the central figure in Turkish politics. His goal is nothing short of the transformation of Turkish politics and society, rendering the country more pious, more prosperous, and more powerful. Erdogan's domination of Turkey's political arena can be attributed to his ruthlessness, the weakness of the opposition, and a genuine record of success. He is an authoritarian, but his power does not flow solely from his ability to wield the coercive instruments of the state. For most of his tenure, Turks have grown wealthier, healthier, and more mobile.<sup>91</sup> Erdogan and the AKP have also made it easier and safer for many Turks to explore their religious identities. As a result, over the course of 17 years the Turkish leader has built a large and devoted constituency.

---

<sup>90</sup> Burak Kadercan, "The Unbearable Lightness of Blaming Erdogan: What Turkey Experts Are Not Telling You," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 8, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/the-unbearable-lightness-of-blaming-erdogan-or-what-turkey-experts-are-not-telling-you>.

<sup>91</sup> World Bank data for the period that corresponds to the Justice and Development Party's tenure offer a variety of socio-economic indicators that all show marked improvement. See, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/turkey?view=chart>; and [https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report\\_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b45ofds7&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=TUR](https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b45ofds7&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=TUR).

But although Erdogan has accomplished much and remains a powerful and compelling political figure, the sustained attention on him and his personality tends to obscure other factors in the evolution of Turkey's foreign policy. Paradoxically, it was the top-down reforms that Ataturk implemented in the early years of the Republic that helped, in part, to create the dynamics for the changes in Turkish foreign policy that were to take place 80 years later. In his effort to re-orient the loyalties of Anatolia's population from the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman Empire, Ataturk conjured the idea of an ethno-national state based on "Turkishness."<sup>92</sup> The development of the new Turkish man and new Turkish woman was linked to Western civilization and science rather than religion and the East, which Ataturk and his fellow nationalists believed represented corruption and backwardness. Yet, this orientation made less sense to Turks after the end of the Cold War, especially after a group of elites who never embraced Ataturk's reforms came to power and Turkey's effort to join the European Union stalled (perhaps permanently).

When it comes to foreign policy, Ankara's emphasis on Turkey's Western orientation was not entirely clear until the beginning of the Cold War, when the Soviet threat drove Turkey to seek NATO membership. Joining NATO in 1952 was, at least in part, a fulfillment of Ataturk's goals. A little more than a decade later, Turkey signed an association agreement with what was then known as the European Economic Community, furthering its efforts to integrate with the West. Successive Turkish prime ministers committed their governments to advancing Turkey's candidacy for European Union membership.

---

<sup>92</sup> Serif Mardin, "Religion and Secularism in Turkey," in *The Modern Middle East*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 347-74.

But two critical developments in the span of a little more than a decade altered Turkey's geopolitical calculations and provided an opportunity for political entrepreneurs like Erdogan and other founders of the AKP to offer an alternative foreign policy more consistent with what party intellectuals and leaders perceived to be Turkish identity. First, on Dec. 26, 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. When that danger disappeared, policymakers and analysts in the West — particularly in the United States — initially declared that Turkey was actually a more important strategic partner in the post-Cold War era than it had been when Washington and Ankara fielded the two biggest militaries in Europe to deter and contain their common enemy. In the ensuing years, Turkey would — in the minds of the foreign policy community — help ensure democratic transitions and prosperity in Central Asia, provide stability (along with the United States and Israel) in the Eastern Mediterranean, foster peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and later drive democracy and prosperity in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings.<sup>93</sup> However, Turkey's relatively limited capacities conspired against these objectives, and without an overarching threat that bound Turkey to the United States and NATO, Western policymakers and analysts were left with little more than their own assertions of Ankara's strategic importance.

Second, after coming to power in November 2002, two successive AKP governments pursued five constitutional reform packages that, together with changes that a previous government had undertaken, convinced the E.U. Commission to offer Ankara a date to begin membership negotiations. This important achievement seemed to confirm both Turkey's democratic trajectory and the strength of the AKP's Islamist Third Way. From the perspective of E.U. officials, Turks had resolved the issue of Islamist power, which

---

<sup>93</sup> Steven A. Cook, "Neither Friend nor Foe: The Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations," Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 82 (November 2018).

had long radicalized the political arena in officially secular Turkey, and pursued both liberalizing political and economic reforms. Ankara, in turn, expected to be rewarded for these reforms.

It was not to be, however. Even before then-Prime Minister Erdogan sought authoritarian solutions to domestic political challenges and began consolidating his personal power, Turkey's E.U. negotiations ran aground. In December 2006, France, Austria, Greece, Cyprus, and Luxembourg demanded the freezing of eight chapters in the European Union's *acquis communautaire* because Turkey refused to open its ports and airports to the Republic of Cyprus.<sup>94</sup> Turkey was obligated to uphold commitments to Cyprus, but this issue was a convenient excuse for European leaders and citizens who opposed Turkey's membership in the European Union on "cultural" grounds, meaning they objected to a Muslim society of 81 million gaining admission to Europe.

The European Union's rebuff, coupled with Turkey's diminution of importance to the West following the end of the Cold War, had a dynamic effect on Turkey's politics and foreign policy. Despite the government's continued public commitments to the North Atlantic Alliance and eventual E.U. membership, the combination of events compelled the Turkish leadership to think beyond the relatively narrow constraints of Ankara's orientation toward the West. This was made easier because the predilection for change was already present among AKP officials and their leading intellectual lights. Erdogan and his first foreign minister, Abdallah Gul, received their political and ideological education from Necmettin Erbakan, the longtime leader of Turkey's Islamist movement. Erbakan rebelled against the way in which the Kemalist elite had oriented Turkish society and

---

<sup>94</sup> David Rennie and Toby Helm, "Move to Freeze Talks on Turkey's EU Entry," *Telegraph*, Nov. 30, 2006, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1535633/Move-to-freeze-talks-on-Turkeys-EU-entry.html>.

foreign policy, arguing that it amounted to self-abnegation before governments that would never accept Turks as equals in Europe. Erbakan believed that Turkey's rightful cultural and political role was as leader of the Muslim world.<sup>95</sup> His acolytes broke with him in 2000 and distanced themselves from much of Erbakan's anti-European Union and anti-Western rhetoric. But after European leaders essentially blocked Turkey's E.U. membership negotiations, the AKP leadership re-oriented its approach to the world in a manner more consistent with the Islamist old guard's view of the world. The most obvious place for AKP's leaders to pursue this more authentic foreign policy was in the Middle East.

## Turkey's Middle East

Turkey was never a mere bystander to events in the Middle East. Before the emergence of the AKP, Turkish policy in the Middle East included recognition of Israel and support for a Palestinian state; containment of and confrontation with Kurdish nationalism, which drew Ankara into cooperation — and at times conflict — with Syria, Iraq, and Iran; and support for the American effort to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1990–91.

But with the AKP came an important change in the country's approach to the Middle East. Erdogan and his partners emphasized Turkey's commitment to NATO and the European Union, but they also valorized the Ottoman Empire. While never quite rejecting the idea of the Republic — with its top-down reforms, political conformity, and its Western-oriented foreign policy — they also intended a grander role for Turkey than

---

<sup>95</sup> Erbakan's ideas were central to the *Milli Gorus*, or National Outlook Movement, from which a succession of Islamist political parties, including the AKP, emerged. The guiding principles of the movement were a return to religious values, emphasis on Turkish culture, and celebration of Turkey's Ottoman past.

being the southeastern outpost of what seemed to be an increasingly anachronistic alliance.<sup>96</sup> As a result, Turkish officials were suddenly everywhere in the former Ottoman domains. Between 2004 and 2010, they were mediating between Israelis and Arabs, dispatching Turkish peacekeepers to Lebanon, developing close ties with Bashar al-Assad, assailing Israel for its policies in Gaza as well as the West Bank, and taking Hamas leaders under their wing. The Turks — along with the Brazilians — also negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>97</sup> Turkey became a co-sponsor of a U.N. initiative called the Alliance of Civilizations, in which Ankara would ostensibly be the leading representative from the Muslim world.

The Middle East also figured prominently in Turkey's economic development during this period. Its rise as a "trading state" led to the opening of new markets for Turkish business all over the world, but the proximity of the Arab world made it an important

---

<sup>96</sup> Behlul Ozkan, "Turkey, Davutoglu and the Idea of Pan Islamism," *Survival* 56, no. 4 (2014): 119–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.941570>.

<sup>97</sup> "Iran Signs Nuclear Fuel Swap Deal With Turkey," *BBC*, May 17, 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8685846.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8685846.stm); Robert F Worth, "Relations with Turkey Kindle Hope in Syria," *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/15/world/middleeast/15syria.html>; Sabrina Tavernise and Ethan Bronner, "Gaza War Created Rift between Israel and Turkey," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/05/world/europe/05turkey.html>; Asli Aydintasbas, "Erdogan's Davos Outburst Is Nothing New," *Forbes*, Jan. 30, 2009, [https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/erdogan-turkey-davos-opinions-contributors\\_0130\\_asli\\_aydintasbas.html#10b398154515](https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/erdogan-turkey-davos-opinions-contributors_0130_asli_aydintasbas.html#10b398154515); "Turkey Approves Lebanon Troops," *BBC*, Sept. 5, 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/5315712.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5315712.stm); Soner Cogaptay, "Hamas Visits Ankara: The AKP Shifts Turkey's Role in the Middle East," *PolicyWatch* 1081, Feb. 16, 2006, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hamas-visits-ankara-the-akp-shifts-turkeys-role-in-the-middle-east>.



market.<sup>98</sup> The Turkish opening to Assad's Syria and the dramatic upgrade in relations between the two countries had a number of important economic aspects. Turkish officials hoped that vastly improved ties would facilitate overland trade between Turkey and the Gulf. They also hoped that the removal of reciprocal visa requirements and other barriers to the movement of people and goods would spur economic development and growth in Turkey's less developed southeast.

When uprisings toppled four Arab leaders between 2011 and 2012, it seemed that Turkey was well positioned to help these countries transition to democracy and develop their economies. Although Turkish officials rejected the idea that the country was a "model" for the region — an idea that captured the imaginations of officials and commentators in the West — they did embrace a role for Turkey as a regional leader and inspiration for Arabs hoping to live in more open and just societies. In April 2012, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu declared to members of Turkey's Grand National Assembly:

A new Middle East is emerging... We will continue to be the master, leader and the servant of the new Middle East. In the new Middle East, the aspirations of the people and justice will rule; not tyranny, oppression, and dictatorships. And we will be a strong defender of this voice. And a new zone of peace, stability, and prosperity will emerge around Turkey.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 40 (Spring 2009): 29–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600005203>.

<sup>99</sup> Barış Ornalı, "Davutoğlu: Turkey Poised to Lead in Syria and New Middle East," *Middle East Voices*, April 27, 2012.

The AKP's activism in the Middle East, combined with the party's successful domestic political program, created a positive feedback loop of sorts. At the same time that many Turks were liberated from Kemalism's conformity and explored their identities in novel ways, they perceived Turkey to be playing a principled and constructive role in the Arab world. As each of these reinforced the other, the country seemed to rediscover its Ottoman roots, or more precisely, the AKP's version of Turkey's past. There were analysts who regarded Turkey's domestic and foreign policy shifts as evidence that the West was losing Turkey.<sup>100</sup> But for Turks, it was more a repudiation of the idea that the country had to be either West or East. Instead, it was simply Turkey — strong, prosperous, and increasingly prominent in the world.

Turkey's ambitions, however, suffered a number of apparent setbacks at the height of its influence. In May of 2013, the country erupted in popular demonstrations over the proposed redevelopment of a small green space in central Istanbul. What became the summer-long Gezi Park protests turned out to be about more than a conflict over forlorn trees in the middle of Istanbul. The demonstrators in Turkey — like their Arab counterparts a few years earlier — were angry over corruption, police brutality, and the crony capitalism that led to the destruction of places like Gezi Park, as well as the arrogance of power in an increasingly authoritarian setting centered on Erdogan.

Then, in the midst of this challenge to the authority of the party and its leader, the Egyptian armed forces overthrew Egypt's first elected president and government. This was troubling for Erdogan for three related reasons: First, there was Turkey's history of

---

<sup>100</sup> See, Michael Rubin, "The Trouble with Turkey," *National Review*, Oct. 17, 2011,

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/10/trouble-turkey-michael-rubin/>; and, Michel Gurfinkiel, "Is Turkey Lost," *Commentary*, March 2007, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/is-turkey-lost/>.

coups d'état and the consequences of these military interventions for the country's Islamists. Second, the international support for the new Egyptian strongman, Maj. Gen. Abdel Fatah el Sisi, might signal to Turkey's officer corps that they too could get away with a coup. Finally, Erdogan and the AKP had invested Turkey's prestige in Egypt's transition, and Turkish leaders regarded the success of a fellow Islamist, Mohamed Morsi, to be an important marker in Ankara's effort to shape the region. Erdogan's vociferous reaction to the Egyptian coup — and the fact that Erdogan provided shelter for members of the Muslim Brotherhood on the run from Egypt — placed Turkey at odds with such regional heavyweights as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and, of course, Egypt — four of the most influential countries in the region.

Neither the Gezi Park protests nor the deterioration of Turkey's strategic position in the Middle East precipitated a rethinking of Turkish foreign policy. In fact, in the context of Turkish politics, these "setbacks" turned out to be opportunities for Erdogan to appeal to identity for political advantage. For example, Erdogan and his supporters implied that demonstrators were not "real Turks," portraying the spontaneous and peaceful protests as the work of the CIA, the German government, Israel's Mossad, international bankers, and CNN.<sup>101</sup> This helped Erdogan make the case to his domestic constituency that there were forces arrayed against Turkey, including traditional NATO allies, and that the country's domestic and foreign successes justified a foreign policy that was increasingly beyond the Western consensus. The irony, of course, was that during the Gezi Park protests, Erdogan employed tactics similar to those of recently deposed Arab dictators, while making support for Middle Easterners who wanted to live in more democratic societies a matter of rhetorical principle. He often used this issue to bludgeon the United

---

<sup>101</sup> Berivan Orucoğlu, "How President Erdogan Mastered the Media," *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 12, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/12/how-president-erdogan-mastered-the-media>.

States and the European Union, as well as counter-revolutionary states in the region such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Egypt, which also happened to be partners in the American-led order in the Middle East. By all measures, Erdogan's position appealed to many Turks.

## **Syrian Trauma**

More than anything, it is with regard to the conflict in Syria that the changes to Turkish policy have been the most pronounced, accentuating differences between Turkey and the United States. The Syrian conflict also convinced Erdogan of the wisdom of the evolution in Turkish foreign policy, a curious outcome given that Turkey's entanglement in its neighbor's civil war is almost universally regarded as an utter failure.

The Turkish position on Syria has gone through important changes since Assad militarized his response to the uprising against him that began in March 2011. Initially, Erdogan sought to use the influence he believed he had with Assad to encourage the Syrian leader to undertake reform. When that did not happen and refugees began crossing into Turkey in large numbers to escape what was rapidly becoming a bloody civil war, Erdogan declared that regime change was the best approach to Syria.

The Turkish leader, consequently, sought to enlist the help of President Barack Obama, but when it became clear that there would be no American march on Damascus to rid Syria of the Assad family and its supporters, Turkish foreign policy again shifted course. As the fragmentation of Syria proceeded and Syria's Kurds accumulated territory along Turkey's southern border, Ankara turned its attention to destroying their state-building project. Accentuating the problem was the fact that the main Syrian rebel actors, the Democratic Union Party and its affiliated militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), are

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

directly connected to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been waging a terrorist campaign against Turkey since the mid-1980s. When Turkey indicated that it had other priorities than fighting the Islamic State, the United States began coordinating with the YPG in 2014, enraging Turks across the political spectrum.

President Donald J. Trump oversaw a change in U.S.-Syrian policy in the fall of 2019 when he ordered the small American force operating with the YPG near the Turkish border to redeploy away from their posts, effectively ending U.S. security coordination with the group.<sup>102</sup> He subsequently ordered all American forces out of the country, leaving Washington with virtually no role to play in managing and eventually settling the conflict. And while the American withdrawal satisfied Ankara's longstanding demand that the United States break ties with the YPG, the Trump administration's policy shift is unlikely to change Turkey's overall foreign policy trajectory. That is because once again for Turkey (this time in Syria), geopolitics and identity are intertwined in ways that encourage changes in Ankara's foreign policy. With the United States unwilling to intervene directly other than to fight the Islamic State with the critical assistance of Turkey's enemies, Ankara turned to Moscow in an effort to secure its interest in Syria. Toward that end, Erdogan has taken part in regular consultations with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran's leader, Hassan Rouhani, as part of the Astana process. Once the United States withdrew its forces and became a non-factor in the conflict, that coordination deepened.

It is entirely possible that if the stakes were not so high for Turkey in Syria, Ankara would be less inclined to work with Moscow and Tehran. Yet, the Syrian conflict encompasses

---

<sup>102</sup> Eric Schmitt, Maggie Haberman, and Edward Wong, "President Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy," *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/trump-turkey-syria.html>.

much more for the Turkish leadership than the immediate threat of Kurdish nationalism. Syria has reinforced the notion among Turkey's elites that the American-led order in the region does not serve their country's interests.

It is more than an issue of geopolitics. There has long been suspicion of Washington in Ankara, given the asymmetries of power between the two countries. Although the United States was not involved, the effort of Europe's great powers to divide Anatolia among themselves after World War I weighs heavily on Turkish society and is part of its collective memory. American policy in Syria accentuates these sensitivities due to Turkish fears that a Syrian-Kurdish proto-state will eventually lead to the partition of Turkey. In a way, Syria was the breaking point for a U.S.-Turkey relationship that had waxed, but mostly waned, for much of the previous decade. The two NATO allies had (barely) weathered the invasion of Iraq, so when the Syrian conflict broke out and American policies once again threatened Turkey's security, Ankara became convinced that Washington's regional role was primarily a malevolent one.

## **Conclusion**

The changes in Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades have been profound. Turkey has not just coordinated with Russia, it has also sought to build its own, alternative regional order in partnership with Qatar. Ankara has deepened its relations with Kuwait, Oman, Sudan, and Libya's U.N.-backed government, and has continued its support for Islamist movements. This is consistent with the AKP's conception of Turkey's identity and Ankara's place in the world. Whether Turkey's approach to the region is successful or not, Erdogan can use either outcome to his political benefit, playing on and appealing to nationalist sentiment and identity to celebrate Turkish successes or to lay blame for setbacks.

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

In light of Turkey's purchase of the S-400, some American policymakers and analysts have asserted that the U.S.-Turkey relationship must be rebuilt or otherwise saved. Long on exhortation and short on details, these officials and commentators have failed to consider the possibility that Turks want ties with the United States to be neither rebuilt nor saved. The bilateral relationship that the two countries enjoyed was a function of interests and concerns that existed during the post-World War II order. As that era has come to a close, Turkey's foreign policy was bound to change in profound ways. Turkey's geopolitical concerns in the region, fused as they are with the ruling party's conception of identity, have produced a major departure from the past. Turkey, in short, will likely be an important actor in the Middle East well into the future. It just may not play the role that the United States wants it to play.

*Steven A. Cook is Eni Enrico Mattei senior fellow for Middle East and Africa studies and director of the International Affairs Fellowship for Tenured International Relations Scholars at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). He is an expert on Arab and Turkish politics as well as U.S.-Middle East policy. Cook is the author of False Dawn: Protest, Democracy, and Violence in the New Middle East (Oxford University Press); The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square (Oxford University Press), which won the 2012 gold medal from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; and Ruling but Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey (The Johns Hopkins University Press).*



## 4. Would a Different Iranian Regime Behave Differently?

*Ariane M. Tabatabai*

Scholars and policymakers often assume that changing a country's regime necessarily leads to significant shifts in outlook, strategic culture, and policy outputs. Indeed, it is on the basis of this assumption that some observers advocate for an active U.S. role in fomenting revolutions and undertaking regime change campaigns. To the extent that other scholars and practitioners have responded to these sorts of claims, they have tended to do so by arguing that regime change involves accepting major costs.<sup>103</sup> These costs, they have posited, outweigh the potential benefits of the advent of a new regime.

---

<sup>103</sup> Olivia Beavers, "Cotton: US Policy Should Be Regime Change in Iran," *The Hill*, June 25, 2017, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/339392-cotton-us-policy-should-be-regime-change-in-iran>; Ray Takeyh, "It's Time to Prepare for Iran's Political Collapse," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/07/05/its-time-to-prepare-for-irans-political-collapse/?utm\\_term=.0e2b6fc351b6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/07/05/its-time-to-prepare-for-irans-political-collapse/?utm_term=.0e2b6fc351b6); Paul Bonicelli, "A Brief History of the 'Democracy Through Regime Change' Policy That Never Was (Part 1)," *Foreign Policy*, May 26, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/26/a-brief-history-of-the-democracy-through-regime-change-policy-that-never-was-part-1/>; Paul Bonicelli, "What Does It Really Mean for U.S. to Support Democracy Abroad? (Part 2)," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/28/what-does-it-really-mean-for-the-u-s-to-support-democracy-abroad-part-2/>; Daniel Depetric, "Inciting Regime Change in Iran Would Be A Terrible Mistake," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-depetris-iran-regime-change-futility-20180725-story.html>; Gregory Bew, "The Danger of Donald Trump's Course in Iran," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/07/16/the-danger-of-donald-trumps-course-in-iran/?utm\\_term=.cbo7f95foeea](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/07/16/the-danger-of-donald-trumps-course-in-iran/?utm_term=.cbo7f95foeea); Charles V. Peña, "Why More Regime Change?," *American Conservative*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-more-regime-change/>.



However, few have disputed the underlying assumption that a change in regime necessarily leads to a change in a state's behavior. The history of Iranian national security policy suggests that regime change may not result in a country significantly altering its behavior, making it an excellent case study. Iranian foreign policy prior to and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in fact, exhibits important continuities, which suggests that some of the most challenging aspects of Iran's current national security strategy may carry on even if the regime falls. In fact, regardless of who is in charge in Tehran, Iran's behavior is likely to remain consistent for decades to come.

### Change and Continuity After Regime Change

Despite a track record that leaves much to be desired, regime change remains some policymakers' favored policy solution.<sup>104</sup> This is due to the fundamental assumption espoused by national security practitioners and international relations scholars that revolutions and regime change lead to fundamentally different political systems, whose different worldviews necessarily produce different policies.<sup>105</sup> It is by no means clear, however, that regime change necessarily leads a country to adopt a different foreign policy posture.

In this respect, Iran is a case in point. 40 years ago, Iranian revolutionaries overthrew the U.S.-aligned Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, best known to Americans as simply the shah.

---

<sup>104</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Regime Change for Dummies," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/14/regime-change-for-dummies/>;

<sup>105</sup> As Stephen Walt notes in *Revolution and War*, a revolution is "the seizure of power as a decisive break with the past." In turn, "the change in 'identity' produced by the revolution [is] associated with a change in behavior." Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 341.

The revolutionaries claimed to espouse a different worldview and, consequently, pledged to change Iranian policies in major ways. In the domestic sphere, the men and women who took to the streets of Iranian cities and towns during the winter of 1978–79 made good on their promises. Many domestic laws and policies changed after the revolution, as the country adopted conservative and theocratic positions on social issues and turned back the clock on a number of reforms undertaken throughout the 20th century.

In addition, the new regime did adopt a significantly different posture on certain foreign policy issues. Most critically, it took an anti-American stance and cut ties with Israel. Since the revolution, Americans have come to know Iran as the country where Islamists chanting “death to America” burn the U.S. flag against the backdrop of anti-American murals. In the United States, administration after administration has lamented the Iranian regime’s malign activities, including its nuclear program, development and proliferation of ballistic missiles, regional interventions (especially in Syria), and support for terrorist groups and militias across some half a dozen countries.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the refrain in Washington asserts that a different Iran, one ruled by a secular democracy backed by the majority of Iranians, would not engage in such activities and would act like a “normal nation.”

But there is limited evidence to suggest that a different Iran would act fundamentally differently and forego these problematic policies. Instead, an assessment of the country’s history suggests otherwise.

---

<sup>106</sup> For example, see, Barack H. Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” White House Archives, Aug. 5, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>; Michael R. Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” May 21, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/>.

## Iran's National Security, Then and Now

Perhaps the greatest concerns regarding Iran's national security policies relate to its past efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and its regional actions, including its support for terrorist groups and militias in the region. When Secretary of State Mike Pompeo laid out twelve areas where the Trump administration wished to see Iran change its behavior, he spoke mostly about Iran's nuclear and regional activities.<sup>107</sup> Ironically, though, in the nuclear realm, Tehran had virtually the same calculus after the revolution as it did before — except for a brief interruption during and in the immediate aftermath of the revolution when the country hit pause on its nuclear activities. This short period was due, in part, to the practical considerations stemming from the transition of power as well as ideological reasons. The new regime's founder and first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, initially opposed the acquisition of nuclear weapons on religious grounds and the acquisition of nuclear energy due to its practical costs.

Already in the 1950s, the shah had sought to develop a nuclear infrastructure (at the time, supported by the United States in the context of President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace initiative).<sup>108</sup> After signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and concluding a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Tehran began to build a research reactor in the capital and a nuclear power plant in Bushehr, by the Persian Gulf.<sup>109</sup> The shah had hoped to lay the foundations for a

---

<sup>107</sup> Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy."

<sup>108</sup> Author interview with Akbar Etemad, phone, Oct. 6, 2014.

<sup>109</sup> Author interview with Akbar Etemad, phone, Oct. 6, 2014.

comprehensive civil nuclear program while his country had significant oil income.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, he also started a covert effort to experiment with the development of nuclear weapons. In effect, he undertook a policy of hedging, allowing the country to develop nuclear latency. As he viewed it, Iran did not need a fully functioning nuclear program, but rather the capability to build one if the balance of power in the region changed.

The shah's domestic critics saw the nuclear program as a waste and an imposition by Western powers. They vowed to end the program upon seizing power. But during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War, they changed their calculus, falling more in line with the shah's thinking. During the war, which Saddam Hussein's Iraq initiated, and which witnessed Baghdad's use of chemical weapons and targeting of Iranian population centers, a long debate emerged in the Iranian political and military elite: Should the regime make a dash for the bomb to meet its strategic needs or should it comply with Khomeini's interpretation of the Shia faith, according to which weapons of mass destruction were prohibited? Ultimately, the belief that Iran should work toward acquiring nuclear latency won the day.

Similarly, the shah's opponents had objected to his decision to deploy troops to Oman to fight alongside Sultan Qaboos' forces in order to crush the rebellion in Dhofar.<sup>111</sup> This decision, as they saw it, was yet another sign of the monarch's imperialism. But many of those critics were among the decision-makers who chose to intervene in Syria decades

---

<sup>110</sup> Author interview with Akbar Etemad, phone, Oct. 6, 2014.

<sup>111</sup> J.E. Peterson, "Guerilla Warfare and Ideological Confrontation in the Arabian Peninsula: The Rebellion in Dhufar," *World Affairs* 139, no. 4 (1977): 278–95 (284–86), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20671698>; Jeremy Jones, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 159.

later. Indeed, the intervention in Syria starting in the early days of the unrest that ultimately led to the civil war in 2011 served some of the same purposes as those pursued by the shah in Dhofar. Syria, like Oman, served to expand Iranian influence in region, support a partner (and buy his goodwill for years to come), and provide Iranian units with much-needed combat experience to increase battlefield effectiveness.<sup>112</sup>

In fact, the theaters where the Islamic Republic has intervened over the past four decades are also areas where the Imperial State had been engaged: Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.<sup>113</sup> The Shah intervened in the region to combat communism and expand Iranian influence, whereas the Islamic Republic has, at times, intervened to combat some terrorist groups (and at other times, used them as a justification for its interventions), but also to undermine America's forward presence. The shah supported royalists in Yemen, supplying them with weapons and training them as the Islamic Republic would later do with the Houthis. Both governments have also adopted similar narratives in justifying Iranian involvement in various countries, presenting their extraterritorial efforts as necessary to avoid having to "shed blood on Iranian soil."<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup> Steven War, *Immortal* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 204; Jones, *Oman, Culture and Diplomacy*, 159; Author interviews with senior Omani officials, Muscat, May 2016 and March 2017; Author interviews with senior Iranian officials, Tehran, Berlin, Vienna, 2014-16.

<sup>113</sup> James F. Goode, "Assisting Our Brothers, Defending Ourselves: The Iranian Intervention in Oman, 1972-75," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2014): 443, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2014.880631>.

<sup>114</sup> Abbas William Samii, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of the SAVAK," *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 1997): 6691, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283847>; Ayatollah Khamenei, "Bayaniat dar Didar-e Khanevadeh-haye Shohada-ye Haftom-e Tir va Jam'ee az Khanevadeh-haye Shohada-ye Modafe'e Haram," *Khamenei.ir*, June 25, 2016.

Iran's proxies are a chief concern for the United States and its partners in the region. Some have targeted U.S. forces in the past (killing several hundred Americans in Iraq in the 2000s) and others have confronted American partners using missiles, rockets, and drones supplied by Tehran. On the surface, Iran's ties to its proxies are unique to the Islamic Republic. In reality, although the regime has created a more extensive network of nonstate allies and partners, and cemented the place of proxies in its national defense strategy, it has done so by building on the foundations laid by the shah. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, the shah was beginning to cultivate ties with Shias in Lebanon and Kurds in Iraq.<sup>115</sup> He saw these relationships as an important conduit for his country, allowing it to have influence in regional states and undermine central authorities when needed.<sup>116</sup> And the shah, like the current regime, leveraged ethnic and religious ties to lay out the foundations of what would become an expansive network of Iranian-backed fighters.

It is important to consider the limits of these similarities and areas of continuity. Iran's most significant departure from its pre-revolution strategy lies in its anti-American stance. To be sure, the country had previously received political and military support from the United States, including advice, training, intelligence sharing, weapons, and equipment. Washington played a key role in helping modernize the Iranian military and in

---

<sup>115</sup> Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Iranian Strategy in Iraq – Politics and 'Other Means,'" Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point Occasional Paper Series, Oct. 13, 2008; Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 15, 2006); Abbas William Samii, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of the SAVAK," 67–70; Arash Reisinezhad, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2 and 134.

<sup>116</sup> Arash Reisinezhad, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*, 133.

building a new security apparatus, including an agency tasked with intelligence and counter-intelligence operations.

But Iran's general outlook toward foreign powers has remained consistent going back to the 18th century. A deep distrust of foreign powers has continuously shaped Iranian national security decision-making. Similarly, Iran has long pursued a policy of balancing — leveraging ties with one power to balance ties with another. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Britain, France, and Russia were the key powers Tehran sought to play off each other. Later, Germany and the United States joined Britain and Russia as key players in the region and Iran adopted the same approach toward them. Today, Iran often seeks to balance Russia against China and both against Europe.

### **Future of Iran's Security Policies and Implications for the United States**

40 years of Iranian national security policy since the revolution reveal a number of areas of continuity with that of the *ancien régime*. This, in turn, suggests that whether the Islamic Republic maintains its hold on power, sees a change in leadership (through the much-awaited supreme leader succession, for example), or collapses altogether, Iran's behavior may not fundamentally change. This is particularly the case in the context of those policies the United States and its partners deem the most destabilizing and challenging, including those relating to Iran's nuclear program and regional activities.

What this means for U.S. national security and Iran policy going forward is that Washington should expect only modest changes in these areas. It cannot expect a complete change in Iranian security thinking, whether the current system remains in place or collapses due to internal or external factors. As such, U.S. strategists would be wise to devise realistic solutions that are based on the assumption that the country's

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

modus operandi is unlikely to change, rather than to wait and hope for a different Iran to emerge.

*Ariane M. Tabatabai is an associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an adjunct senior research scholar at Columbia University. She is the co-author of Triple Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China and the author of the forthcoming book, No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy.*

***Acknowledgement:** The author is grateful to Christine Wormuth for her helpful feedback on an earlier draft.*





## 5. Where Do We Go from Here? Nuclear Proliferation Scenarios to Watch for in the Middle East

*Or (Ori) Rabinowitz*

It is not easy being a nuclear proliferation analyst in 2020. Particularly in the Middle East, there is a relatively high likelihood of having to revise any analysis with every news cycle. Much of this has to do with President Donald Trump, due to his personality, leadership style, and zigzagging foreign policy. The best nuclear-related example is Trump's North Korea policy, in which the president quickly shifted from hurling insults to shaking hands.

Added to this uncertainty are the region's existing conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, and, to a lesser extent, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, one must consider domestic issues like the unrest in Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon and the political deadlock in Israel, not to mention Russian and Chinese attempts to increase influence in the region. Any analysis in this area, then, must necessarily be somewhat tentative. Nevertheless, there are three potential proliferators to watch for — Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia — as well as the reaction of a fourth important regional actor, Israel.

### **Assessing the Trajectory of the Iran Deal**

In the case of Iran, the critical question has to do with the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — a.k.a., the Iran nuclear deal — and, relatedly, Trump's "maximum pressure" policy toward the Islamic Republic, which he launched following his decision to withdraw from the deal in May 2018.

Throughout 2019, Trump vacillated on Iran. At one point in June, he seemed willing to follow the advice of his hawkish former National Security Advisor John Bolton, who advocated for a limited strike against Iranian targets.<sup>117</sup> According to media reports, Trump ordered the strike against Iranian targets aborted when U.S. planes were only ten minutes away. Since the aborted raid, Trump has fired Bolton and expressed interest in meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. The lack of a strong U.S. response to the September 2019 attack against Saudi oil facilities on the one hand, and the targeted assassination of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 on the other, serve to outline a largely inconsistent Iran policy, leaving U.S. allies and enemies guessing when the pendulum will swing next.

This “pendulum” question is acutely relevant for any potential new Iran deal. The possibility of a new nuclear deal with Tehran was recently raised by both the Iranians and the Americans, but with each side issuing contradicting conditions for its fulfillment. The Iranians, for their part, condition the negotiation of a new deal on “permanent sanctions relief.”<sup>118</sup> The Trump administration has so far rejected calls for permanent sanctions relief and insists on maintaining maximum pressure and increasing sanctions, “until Iran changes its behavior” in a manner which would pave the way for a new, more comprehensive deal.<sup>119</sup> Between May 2019 and January 2020, Iran has gradually withdrawn from JCPOA-related obligations tied to uranium enrichment and, in early January, Iran

---

<sup>117</sup> Peter Baker, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Crowley, “An Abrupt Move That Stunned Aides: Inside Trump’s Aborted Attack on Iran,” *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/us/politics/trump-iran-decision.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Tamara Qiblawi, “Iran’s Zarif raises the prospect of a new nuclear agreement with Trump,” *CNN*, Sept. 23, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/23/middleeast/zarif-us-talks-intl/index.html>.

<sup>119</sup> “Remarks by President Trump on Iran,” The White House, Jan. 8, 2020,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran/>.

officially suspended "all limits" on its program.<sup>120</sup> In late January, Iranian officials floated the notion of Iran withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>121</sup>

Currently, the path toward starting talks on a new Iran deal seems blocked. However, the Iranian position may change down the road, given Iran's declining economic condition. The resumption of U.S. sanctions in general, and the sanctions on Iranian oil exports specifically, following the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, has played a significant part in reducing Iranian revenues.<sup>122</sup> According to International Monetary Fund estimations, Iran's GDP is expected to decline by 6 percent in 2019, following a 4 percent decline in 2018.<sup>123</sup> According to RAND analyst Ariane M. Tabatabai, it is likely that at least some Iranian officials realize that resumption of talks may be unavoidable, yet they wish to delay engagement for as long as possible.<sup>124</sup> In the meantime, the Iranian government is seeking to enhance its regional leverage and to improve the starting point of such talks, amassing bargaining chips that would enable it to improve its negotiating position.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> "Russia: U.S. 'Myth-Making' About Iran's Enrichment Right," *Tehran Times*, Jan. 21, 2020,

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/444415/Russia-U-S-myth-making-about-Iran-s-enrichment-right>.

<sup>121</sup> "MP Elaborates on Details of Plan for Iran's Withdrawal from NPT," *Tehran Times*, Jan. 29, 2020,

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/444659/MP-elaborates-on-details-of-plan-for-Iran-s-withdrawal-from-NPT>.

<sup>122</sup> Raz Zimmt and Tomer Fadlon, "The Economic Crisis and the Protest Movement in Iran: One Year after the Renewal of Sanctions," *INSS Insight*, no. 1208, Aug. 28, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-economic-crisis-and-the-protest-movement-in-iran-one-year-after-the-renewal-of-sanctions/>.

<sup>123</sup> Zachary Laub, "What Is the Status of the Iran Nuclear Agreement?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-status-iran-nuclear-agreement>.

<sup>124</sup> "Comments by RAND Analyst Ariane M. Tabatabai, US-Iran Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, Oct. 3, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/conference-calls/us-iran-relations>.

<sup>125</sup> "Comments by RAND Analyst Ariane M. Tabatabai, US-Iran Relations."

Another key factor is the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and the possibility of a new, Democratic president with a different Iran agenda. Iran may be attempting to run the clock out on Trump and his maximum pressure policy in the hopes he will soon be out of office and Iran will have a new negotiating partner.

Although Tehran and Washington seem uninterested in an all-out war, there is no guarantee that both would be able to contain an inadvertent escalation in a future crisis. When Iran retaliated for the Soleimani assassination, it launched rockets at U.S. targets in Iraq, in an attack that did not cause any American fatalities. Would the United States refrain from taking action following an Iranian strike that did cause multiple U.S. fatalities?

The perceived weakness of the U.S. response to Iran's activities in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, along with America's abandonment of the Kurds in northern Syria, is causing concern about American credibility in the Iranian context among U.S. regional allies.<sup>126</sup> In Israel, Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria, and his declaration in late October that the United States is "getting out" of the Middle East,<sup>127</sup> has fueled a debate about his reliability as a strategic ally when it comes to his willingness to commit to military involvement in the region, and his readiness to respond strongly and consistently to

---

<sup>126</sup> Amos Harel, "The Sunni-U.S. Alliance Against Iran Has Weakened, and Trump Is Partly to Blame," *Ha'aretz*, Sept. 24, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-the-sunni-u-s-alliance-vs-iran-has-weakened-partly-due-to-trump-1.7873651>.

<sup>127</sup> "Donald Trump Vows to Get Out of 'Blood-Stained' Middle East," *Al Jazeera*, Oct. 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/donald-trump-vows-blood-stained-middle-east-191024074507902.html>.

Iranian transgressions.<sup>128</sup> America's regional military presence, though, is seen as separate from Trump's inclination to publicly support embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as evidenced by the recent unveiling of the Trump administration's peace plan in late January.

The perception of a disengaged United States could potentially fuel the gradual disintegration of the U.S.-led coalition against Iran. Indeed, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are all likely reassessing the credibility of America's commitment to take a tough line on Iran's regional ambitions. Consequently, the possible nuclear paths of two other important regional actors — Turkey and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia — take on added significance. Currently, only one actor in the region, Israel, is in possession of nuclear weapons capabilities, and only Iran is producing nuclear energy for civilian purposes — although the United Arab Emirates is planning to follow suit in the coming months. Both Turkey and Saudi Arabia, however, have expressed a desire to change the existing nuclear landscape in the Middle East.

### Assessing Turkey's Trajectory

The second possible proliferator is Turkey. In 2008, Turkey, a Non-Nuclear Weapon State member of the NPT, rolled out plans to construct two nuclear power plants in Akkuyu and Sinop, consisting of four units each, followed by a later, more tentative plan to build a third plant in İğneada.<sup>129</sup> But things are not going well. The deal for the Sinop site was

---

<sup>128</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "Does Israel Have Something to Fear from Donald Trump?" *National Interest*, Oct. 26, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/does-israel-have-something-fear-donald-trump-90941>.

<sup>129</sup> "Nuclear Power in Turkey," World Nuclear Association, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-t-z/turkey.aspx>.

recently cancelled,<sup>130</sup> and the deal for İğneada is still a long way off. Thus, as of 2020, only the Akkuyu project is slowly moving forward with any certainty.

In recent months, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has consistently and publicly challenged the existing nuclear order in the Middle East. On Sept. 24, 2019, he told the U.N. General Assembly: “The position of nuclear power should either be forbidden for all or permissible for everyone.”<sup>131</sup> Likewise, on Sept. 4, Erdogan stated that it was unacceptable for nuclear-armed states to prevent Turkey from obtaining its own nuclear weapons, and specifically criticized Israel’s nuclear status, adding: “We have Israel nearby, as almost neighbors. They scare (other nations) by possessing these. No one can touch them.”<sup>132</sup> So far, Erdogan has refrained from declaring a clear interest in nuclear weapons development. Instead, he has mainly tried to use Israel’s nuclear weapons to bolster his criticism of how Turkey is treated by the United States and Europe.<sup>133</sup>

There are indications that Israel is concerned with Turkey’s military capabilities. In August 2019, the Israeli media reported that Israel had lobbied Washington to drop Turkey from its F-35 program.<sup>134</sup> Turkey is a key NATO ally in the region and the United

---

<sup>130</sup> “Turkey Looks to Cancel Japan Sinop Project,” Nuclear Engineering International, Jan. 27, 2020, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsturkey-looks-to-cancel-japan-sinop-project-7653758>.

<sup>131</sup> “Turkey’s Erdogan Says Nuclear Power Should Either Be Free for All or Banned,” *Reuters*, Sept. 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/un-assembly-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-says-nuclear-power-should-either-be-free-for-all-or-banned-idUSKBN1W924L>.

<sup>132</sup> “Erdogan Says It’s Unacceptable that Turkey Can’t Have Nuclear Weapons,” *Reuters*, Sept. 4, 2019, <https://es.reuters.com/article/oilRpt/idUKL5N25V63N>.

<sup>133</sup> Aaron Stein, “Erdogan Doesn’t Want Nukes, He Wants to Blow Up the System,” *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/erdogan-doesnt-want-nukes-he-wants-to-blow-up-the-system/>.

<sup>134</sup> “Israel Reportedly Lobbied Washington to Drop Turkey from F-35 Program,” *Times of Israel*, Aug. 1, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-reportedly-lobbied-washington-to-drop-turkey-from-f-35-program/>.

States stores about 50 nuclear gravity bombs at Incirlik Air Base, weapons the White House is now reportedly thinking about removing.<sup>135</sup> But from Israel's perspective, Turkey's nuclear trajectory is not yet a cause for concern. Turkey's membership in NATO and the lack of a clear indication that it is interested in nuclear weapons are two mitigating factors. Erdogan's decision to expand Turkey's ties with Russia, including in the nuclear field, is troubling, but as of late February 2020, there are reasons to doubt that Turkey is considering the development of nuclear weapons.<sup>136</sup>

### **Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Trajectory and Possible Israeli Reactions**

The final potential proliferator to keep an eye on is Saudi Arabia. Compared with Turkey's, the Saudi nuclear trajectory is more troubling. For its part, Saudi Arabia, also a Non-Nuclear Weapon State member of the NPT, is planning to construct up to 16 high-power nuclear reactors for power production by 2040. As of early 2020, none have broken ground, though the kingdom does operate a small research reactor.<sup>137</sup> Significantly, the Saudis are in talks with Russia, France, China, the United States, and South Korea on buying from these nuclear exporters different components and technology needed to develop nuclear infrastructure.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Can the U.S. Protect Its Nuclear Weapons in Turkey?" *Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/18/can-us-protect-its-nuclear-weapons-turkey/>.

<sup>136</sup> Mark Hibbs, "Scratching Erdogan's Nuclear Itch," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Oct, 22, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/22/scratching-erdogan-s-nuclear-itch-pub-80178>.

<sup>137</sup> "Nuclear Power in Saudi Arabia," World Nuclear Association, April 2019, <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/saudi-arabia.aspx>.

<sup>138</sup> "Nuclear Power in Saudi Arabia."

Israel's nuclear monopoly in the region also figures prominently in Saudi thinking. In November 2017, *Al-Akhabr*, a Lebanese newspaper with ties to Hizballah, published what it claimed was a document containing a classified Saudi peace plan with Israel, proposed by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir.<sup>139</sup> According to the leaked document, the first point of the plan concerned Israel's nuclear monopoly: "Any detente between the kingdom and Israel requires equivalence between the two countries: At the military level, Israel is considered the only country with nuclear weapons in the Middle East. ... Accordingly, the kingdom must acquire this deterrent or seek to remove Israel's."<sup>140</sup>

Compared with Turkey, Saudi Arabia has been more explicit about its intentions. Over the past two years, Saudi leaders have repeatedly pledged that if Iran successfully develops nuclear weapons, they will rapidly move to acquire ones of their own. In March 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman stated that the kingdom "does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."<sup>141</sup> Two months later, Al-Jubeir stated that the Saudis would do "whatever it takes to protect our people" and that Saudi Arabia had "made it very clear, if Iran acquires nuclear capability, we will do everything we can to do the same."<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>139</sup> "Saudi Arabia 'Plans Official Ties with Israel,' Leaked Document Reveals," *The New Arab*, Nov. 14, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/11/14/saudi-arabia-plans-official-ties-with-israel-leaked-document>.

<sup>140</sup> "Saudi Arabia 'Plans Official Ties with Israel,' Leaked Document Reveals."

<sup>141</sup> "Saudi Crown Prince: If Iran Develops Nuclear Bomb, So Will We," *CBS News*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-iran-nuclear-bomb-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>142</sup> Nicole Gaouette, "Saudi Arabia Set to Pursue Nuclear Weapons If Iran Restarts Program," *CNN*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/09/politics/saudi-arabia-nuclear-weapons/index.html>.



The Saudis are also considering future paths to uranium enrichment. Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, the newly appointed energy minister and an influential figure within the regime, told a conference in Abu Dhabi in September 2019 that the kingdom is looking into developing uranium enrichment capabilities.<sup>143</sup> This technology is considered sensitive because it can be used relatively easily to accumulate fissile material for nuclear bombs, although there is nothing in the NPT that prevents states from acquiring it for use in a civilian program. These sorts of statements track closely with reports that the Saudis refuse to subscribe to the so-called “Gold Standard” for nuclear exports, which entails renouncing uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing.

In recent years, Russia has been actively exporting its nuclear technology to countries around the world “as a way of cementing ties with its fellow emerging markets.”<sup>144</sup> According to *The Economist*, Russia now “dominates the market for design and export of nuclear plants,” with China being Russia’s “only real competitor.”<sup>145</sup> Saudi Arabia’s position as a legitimate client of nuclear technology in the global market means that a U.S.

---

<sup>143</sup> “Saudi Arabia Wants to Enrich Uranium for Nuclear Power – Minister,” *Reuters*, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/energy-wec-saudi-nuclearpower/saudi-arabia-wants-to-enrich-uranium-for-nuclear-power-minister-idUSL5N26o2QH>.

<sup>144</sup> Ben Aris, “Russia’s Nuclear Power Exports Are Booming,” *Moscow Times*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/09/russias-nuclear-power-exports-are-booming-a65533>.

<sup>145</sup> “Russia Leads the World at Nuclear-Reactor Exports,” *The Economist*, Aug. 7, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/08/07/russia-leads-the-world-at-nuclear-reactor-exports>.

refusal to export to it, should the kingdom decline to renounce uranium enrichment, will probably not hinder its chances of importing the technology from China and Russia.<sup>146</sup>

Another key question relating to the future of the Saudi nuclear program has to do with a possible counter-proliferation response. The history of the Middle East is rife with cases of raids launched by countries against the nuclear facilities of their enemies. The Israeli raids against Iraq's Osirak reactor in June 1981 and a Syrian reactor in September 2007 are probably the most noteworthy, but they are not the only ones. The Iranian air force unsuccessfully tried to strike the Iraqi reactor in September 1980, while the Iraqis launched several air strikes against the site of the Iranian Bushehr nuclear power plant in the mid-1980s.<sup>147</sup> In 1991, the United States attacked multiple sites suspected of being a part of Iraq's clandestine nuclear program.<sup>148</sup>

Israel also has a track record of conducting covert sabotage operations against hostile nuclear programs. It is generally believed that Israel conducted such operations against the nuclear programs of Pakistan and Iraq in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and later against the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>149</sup> The latter set of actions included the Stuxnet cyber attack, reportedly conducted jointly with the United States, which targeted the

---

<sup>146</sup> Nicholas L. Miller and Tristan A. Volpe, "Geostrategic Nuclear Exports: The Competition for Influence in Saudi Arabia," *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/geostrategic-nuclear-exports-competition-influence-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>147</sup> Sarah E. Kreps and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Attacking the Atom: Does Bombing Nuclear Facilities Affect Proliferation?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2011): 161-87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.559021>.

<sup>148</sup> Kreps and Fuhrmann, "Attacking the Atom."

<sup>149</sup> Or Rabinowitz, "The Dilemma of a 'Trigger Happy' Protégé – Israel, France and President Carter's Iraq Policy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1615461>.

uranium enrichment facility at Natanz. For Israel, a nuclear-capable Saudi Arabia armed with advanced ballistic missiles poses a serious national security threat. Israel's "Begin Doctrine," named after Prime Minister Menachem Begin, maintains that Israel will not allow regional rivals to come into possession of nuclear weapons. The question is: Would Israel label Saudi Arabia a nuclear rival, and what would Israel do should Saudi Arabia continue down its nuclear path?

According to March 2018 press reports, Netanyahu has raised this issue with Trump, reportedly asking him "not to go ahead with an emerging deal to sell Saudi Arabia nuclear reactors," or at least to condition a U.S. export deal on a Saudi agreement to refrain from uranium enrichment.<sup>150</sup> Trump, it appears, refused to make any such pledge, telling Netanyahu that if the United States did not supply the reactors, then the Russians or Chinese would.<sup>151</sup>

The Israelis are also worried about Saudi Arabia's ballistic missile program. Confirming the suspicions raised by nuclear weapons expert Jeffrey Lewis and his team,<sup>152</sup> recent U.S. intelligence indicates that the Chinese are currently assisting the Saudis in their effort to

---

<sup>150</sup> "Netanyahu Said to Ask Trump not to Sell Saudis Nuclear Reactors," *Times of Israel*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-said-to-ask-trump-not-to-supply-nuclear-reactors-to-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>151</sup> "Netanyahu Said to Ask Trump not to Sell Saudis Nuclear Reactors."

<sup>152</sup> Paul Sonne, "Can Saudi Arabia Produce Ballistic Missiles? Satellite Imagery Raises Suspicions," *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/can-saudi-arabia-produce-ballistic-missiles-satellite-imagery-raises-suspicions/2019/01/23/49e46d8c-1852-11e9-a804-c35766b9f234\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/can-saudi-arabia-produce-ballistic-missiles-satellite-imagery-raises-suspicions/2019/01/23/49e46d8c-1852-11e9-a804-c35766b9f234_story.html).

expand their ballistic missile capabilities.<sup>153</sup> Saudi Arabia's missile program is another indication that the Saudis may indeed be seriously considering a weapons program.<sup>154</sup>

Yet a further cause for Israeli concern is Saudi Arabia's ambiguous nuclear relationship with Pakistan. According to some assessments, the two countries have reached a covert nuclear bargain, in which Pakistan would supply Saudi Arabia with ready-made nuclear bombs should Iran cross the nuclear threshold.<sup>155</sup> In such a scenario, an Israeli sabotage effort against Saudi nuclear infrastructure would not be particularly effective, and Saudi ballistic missiles would become instantaneously very dangerous.

Bilateral Israeli-Saudi relations have grown closer in recent years against the backdrop of a mutual interest in curbing Iranian regional influence and the Iranian nuclear program, including "extensive behind-the-scenes diplomatic and intelligence cooperation."<sup>156</sup> More recently, on Jan. 29, 2020, the kingdom expressed support for the Trump administration's Middle East peace plan — an overwhelmingly pro-Israeli scheme — voicing its

---

<sup>153</sup> Phil Mattingly, et al., "US Intel Shows Saudi Arabia Has Advanced Its Ballistic Missile Program," *CNN*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/05/politics/us-intelligence-saudi-arabia-ballistic-missile-china/index.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Jeffrey Lewis, "Sorry, Fared: Saudi Arabia Can Build a Bomb Any Damn Time It Wants To," *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/12/sorry-fareed-saudi-arabia-can-build-a-bomb-any-damn-time-it-wants-to/>.

<sup>155</sup> Mark Urban, "Saudi Nuclear Weapons 'On Order' from Pakistan," *BBC News*, Nov. 6, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24823846>.

<sup>156</sup> Suzan Quitaz, "Saudi-Israeli Relations: The Emergence of a New Alliance," *The New Arab*, Aug. 14, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/8/14/saudi-israeli-relations-the-emergence-of-a-new-alliance>.

appreciation of Trump’s “efforts to develop a comprehensive peace plan.”<sup>157</sup> In several interviews throughout 2018, the Saudi crown prince expressed what can only be termed “dovish” views regarding the Israeli-Arab conflict, repeatedly saying that “Israelis are entitled to live peacefully on their own land.”<sup>158</sup> The relationship had come to be perceived as so close that in September 2018 Israeli security officials had to “strongly deny” reports that Israel had agreed to export Iron Dome missile defense systems to Saudi Arabia.<sup>159</sup>

It is not yet clear whether a perceived U.S. disengagement from the region will cause the Saudis to reverse their warming toward Israel, but there are already signs that the crown prince is considering a rapprochement with Tehran.<sup>160</sup> Should Israeli-Saudi relations continue to improve, Israel would more likely consider tacit acceptance of a nascent Saudi nuclear capability, and possibly a mutual no-attack pledge. After all, Israel has pursued a similar policy toward Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal since the mid-1980s. Publicly,

---

<sup>157</sup> Omri Nahmias, “Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, UAE Welcome Trump Peace Plan,” *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 29, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Saudi-Arabia-Egypt-Qatar-UAE-welcome-Trump-peace-plan-615752>.

<sup>158</sup> “Saudi Crown Prince Says Israelis Have Right to their Own Land,” *Reuters*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-prince-israel/saudi-crown-prince-says-israelis-have-right-to-their-own-land-idUSKCN1H91SQ>. Jeffrey Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran’s Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good,’” *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>.

<sup>159</sup> Jack Khoury and Yaniv Kubovich, “Israel Denies Reports Saudi Arabia Purchased Iron Dome Missile Defense Systems,” *Ha’aretz*, Sept. 14, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/israel-denies-reports-saudi-arabia-purchased-iron-dome-missile-defense-systems-1.6469295>.

<sup>160</sup> Zvi Bar’el, “Saudi Arabia Recognizes Its Weakness and Is Ready to Talk to the Iranian Foe,” *Ha’aretz*, Oct. 6, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/.premium-saudi-arabia-recognizes-its-weakness-and-is-ready-to-talk-to-the-iranian-foe-1.7945314>.

Israel and Pakistan, which do not have diplomatic ties, refrain from threatening each other. Unconfirmed rumors maintain that the two countries reached a secret understanding in the late 1980s not to target one another.

On the other hand, should the budding bilateral relations sour, Israel may well decide to execute the Saudi contingency of the Begin Doctrine. In theory, such an operation would first consist of a diplomatic effort to halt the Saudi program, coupled with a shadow war of sabotage targeting Saudi nuclear facilities and personnel. It would end any chance of a larger Israeli-Arab reconciliation, and Israel would likely pay a high price in the diplomatic arena for it. In addition, an Israeli counter-proliferation raid against Saudi nuclear targets would be extremely risky in terms of its consequences. As opposed to Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007, Saudi Arabia is an important U.S. ally. Close Saudi-U.S. ties would likely translate into a very high, punitive cost for such a theoretical raid, and Israeli leaders would probably reject such a path.

However, a parallel question which may impact Israeli strategy in this context concerns the U.S. reaction to a Saudi nuclear bomb. Will America tacitly accept a nuclear-capable Saudi Arabia? Cold War nuclear history shows that when a U.S. ally, like Israel, Pakistan, or South Africa, crosses the nuclear threshold over U.S. objections, America opts to tacitly accept this development, as long as the capability remains concealed.<sup>161</sup> Some experts believe that, with some variation, the same process is happening now with North Korea.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, should the White House consider the Saudi bomb as a serious

---

<sup>161</sup> Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>162</sup> Jeffrey Lewis, "Your Mission Is to Keep All This From Collapsing Into Nuclear Hellfire," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 18, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/18/your-mission-is-to-keep-all-this-from-collapsing-into-nuclear-hellfire/>.

threat, it is possible that under certain conditions, it may support, or at a minimum refrain from a harsh reaction to, an Israeli strike against Saudi nuclear targets. The U.S. reaction itself, naturally, would greatly depend on the president and the administration's agenda, and the degree to which a Saudi nuclear capability would be cause for concern.

## Conclusion

It is possible that in the coming years both Iran and Saudi Arabia will possess nuclear capabilities, heralding the end of Israel's regional nuclear monopoly. It is also possible that some other "dark horse" will reveal itself in the nuclear race. After all, Syria's covert nuclear program went undetected for years before Israeli intelligence discovered it in 2007, and Israel had no knowledge of Libya's nuclear efforts before they were disclosed to the West following the 2003 Gulf war. For Israel, the chances of maintaining its regional nuclear monopoly are decreasing each year. The question for Israeli audience is: Are Israeli decision-makers preparing contingency plans to address Israel's security interests the day after the monopoly ends? Improving Israel's relations with the Arab world and making tangible progress in the Palestinian channel could prove to be critical in the future for such plans. Barring a Saudi nuclear weapon, one possible new alliance that may emerge in the coming years is an Israeli-Saudi-Emirati alliance, in which Israel's nuclear capabilities play a role as a regional deterrent against Iran. This would be a new Middle East indeed.

*Or (Ori) Rabinowitz is an assistant professor at the International Relations Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research interests include nuclear proliferation, nuclear history, and Israeli-American relations. Her book, Bargaining on Nuclear Tests, was published in April 2014 by Oxford University Press. She has since published articles in*

POLICY ROUNDTABLE: The Future of the Middle East

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-the-middle-east/>

*several academic journals, including International Security, Journal of Strategic Studies, and International History Review, as well as op-eds and columns in the Washington Post and Ha'aretz. She holds a PhD from the War Studies Department of King's College London, and an MA in Security Studies and an LLB degree in Law, both from Tel-Aviv University. She was awarded personal research grants by the Israeli Science Foundation and is a member of the "Israel Young Academy," a forum of the Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities.*

