



RETHINKING U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BY **JOE BARNES**, BONNER MEANS BAKER FELLOW, RICE UNIVERSITY'S BAKER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND **ANDREW BOWEN, PH.D.**, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES, CENTER FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTER FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AT THE BAKER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND THE CENTER FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST

center for the
MIDDLE EAST
Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy



CENTER FOR THE
NATIONAL
INTEREST

RETHINKING U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BY **JOE BARNES**, BONNER MEANS BAKER FELLOW, RICE UNIVERSITY'S BAKER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND **ANDREW BOWEN, PH.D.**, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES, CENTER FOR THE NATIONAL INTEREST

© 2015 by the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University and the Center for the National Interest

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy and the Center for the National Interest.

The research and views expressed are those of the individual authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy or the Center for the National Interest.

Background

President Barack Obama's Middle East policies have come under increasingly sharp criticism since the emergence of ISIL as a threat to Iraq during the summer of 2014. Some of this criticism has come from predictable quarters: neoconservatives and liberal interventionists who have long been critical of the Obama administration's relatively "soft touch" approach to the region, notably its hesitance to get the United States more deeply involved in the Syrian civil war. But a sense of drift in U.S. policy toward the Middle East has spread to the general public, as well.

There is little doubt that the sudden rise of ISIL—made stark by the group's seizure of Mosul, Iraq's third largest city, in June 2014—caught the Obama administration flatfooted, despite earlier, alarming ISIL gains in Anbar Province. It announced a strategy the goal of which, in Obama's words, is "to degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL.¹ The United States, with support from allies, has launched air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria; it has assembled an international coalition, from within the region and beyond it, to confront ISIL; it has assisted Iraqi forces, which have scored significant successes, notably the recapture of Tikrit, as well as reverses, such as the loss of Ramadi; and it has ramped up support for the moderate Syrian opposition. Yet the criticism of the administration's approach to ISIL—and, more broadly, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Persian Gulf and, indeed, the wider Middle East—has remained vociferous. This criticism focuses on both the administration's purported tardiness of response and the allegedly half-hearted nature of that response.

There is some truth to these critiques. The administration's policies do seem driven by day-to-day crisis management and a desire to appear to be "doing something." There is, in addition, an obvious disconnect between administration's rhetoric in describing the dire threat posed by ISIL and the president's repeated promise not to introduce U.S. combat forces to the conflict. Critics may also be forgiven for doubting the depth of the administration's commitment to overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. They have grounds to suspect that increased U.S. support for the moderate Syrian opposition is, in large part, merely an effort to placate voices in the United States and in the region that have long insisted that Obama make good on his 2011 declaration that "Assad must go."²

1 Barak Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014, the White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

2 Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama Says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011.

The president has also been criticized for his Iran policy. His efforts to strike a deal with Iran on that country's nuclear program have been attacked both in the United States and in the region. At least some of these attacks are grounded in fear that an agreement would a) strengthen Iran's financial position by lifting sanctions on its oil exports; b) bolster what critics believe to be Tehran's drive for regional hegemony; and c) lay the groundwork for a détente between Iran and the United States that would undermine other allies in Middle East—notably Israel and Saudi Arabia.

What strategy should we pursue in confronting ISIL and addressing the broader challenges of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Yemen, stability in the Persian Gulf, and the ever-present Israeli-Palestinian dispute? As we will stress in this paper, any such strategy must go beyond the usual bromides of U.S. "leadership" and "engagement," terms routinely deployed in the absence of any consideration of what the goals of that leadership and engagement should be. U.S. leadership and engagement must, of course, play a part in any U.S. strategy in the Middle East. The U.S. possesses substantial—though not unlimited—military, economic, and diplomatic means to influence events that redound to our national advantage; it would be foolhardy not to use them.

But leadership and engagement must be subservient to the objectives of U.S. strategy, which are the protection and, if possible, the advancement of our core interests in the region. At one level, our policymakers and opinion shapers are aware of those interests, ranging from the unimpeded flow of oil to international markets to reducing the threat of terrorism to the United States. But such considerations can all too often be lost in an atmosphere of crisis when a rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground and calls for decisive action can lead to policies unmoored from a sober assessment of the United States' true stakes in the conflict. This is doubly true when dealing with a threat like ISIL, whose extremist ideology and brutal practices prompt revulsion, anger, fear, and unsurprising calls for action.

Going Back to Basics: U.S. Interests in the Region

There are any number of characteristics that a successful strategy must possess, some of which will be discussed later. They include the flexibility needed to address rapidly changing events; an understanding of the limits of U.S. power, as significant as it is; the necessity of matching abstract rhetoric to actual policies; the imperative of accepting trade-offs—even excruciating ones—between U.S. interests and values; and an appreciation of the risks posed by “mission creep,” by which limited, short-term interventions can expand in scope and lengthen in duration. But the first and, arguably, most critical step is to “get back to basics” by a hardheaded examination of our core interests.

Oil

First and foremost comes oil. The Middle East represents roughly 50 percent of world’s oil reserves and about 25 percent of global petroleum production. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter declared “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”³ This declaration—what would be called the “Carter Doctrine”—was narrowly directed at the Soviet Union. But it also reflected the broader reality revealed by the oil shocks of the 1970s: the American and, indeed, global economies were profoundly dependent on Middle Eastern—and specifically Persian Gulf—oil.

This reality also explained our “special relationship” with Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is by far the most important oil producer in the Middle East; it is also the only country in the world with significant excess production capacity, permitting it, in a crisis, to offset the major loss of supply elsewhere in the world. At its root, the “special relationship” is grounded on a fairly direct quid pro quo. Saudi Arabia would work to assure a steady supply of oil to world markets; the United States would, if necessary, act militarily to protect Saudi Arabia. When Iraq under Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened the kingdom, we made good on our part of the bargain, first, by going to war to eject Iraq from Kuwait and, second, by supporting international sanctions to constrain Iraq’s ability to threaten its neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, in the wake of outright hostilities.

³ Jimmy Carter, “State of the Union Address,” January 23, 1980, the Jimmy Carter Library, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.

How does the rise of “fracking” and the dramatic increase in U.S. oil production affect our national interest in a steady supply of Persian Gulf oil? The answer: rather less than one might think. The boom in U.S. production—driven by fracking and, to a lesser extent, deepwater technologies—is a clear boon to the U.S. economy. It reduces our trade deficit, boosts employment, and bolsters our overall economic growth. Moreover, increased U.S. production—reflected in a sharp decline in U.S. oil imports—has also increased total world supply and placed downward pressure on global petroleum prices. The latter has, of course, plummeted over the last year. However, a dramatic disruption of the flow of petroleum from the Persian Gulf would still lead to higher prices and slower economic growth around the world and here in the United States. The reason: oil prices are set by global supply and demand. U.S. production increases, in other words, may have diminished the importance of the Persian Gulf to world oil markets but have not come close to ending it.

How does the threat of ISIL affect our energy interests in the Middle East? To date, surprisingly little. Syria is not a major oil producer. Iraq is—but its most important producing areas are, first, in the Shi’a south and, second, in Kurdish areas to the north. These are areas where ISIL—a Sunni Arab movement—possesses little appeal. To the extent that ISIL makes inroads into southern Iraq or leads to a collapse in governance in Baghdad, it could imperil global oil supply. But the truth is that the emergence of a de facto partition of Iraq into an ISIL-dominated Sunni region, a Shi’a south, and a quasi-independent Kurdish area would not necessarily have much impact on international oil markets. Indeed, a de facto partition could actually increase Iraqi oil exports by facilitating exports from Iraqi Kurdistan.

Israel

U.S. support for Israel’s security has been a linchpin of Washington’s Middle East policy for decades. Today, that support manifests itself in direct financial assistance, sales of advanced military technologies, close military and intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic “cover” in institutions such as the United Nations. The U.S.-Israeli relationship is surely among the closest that Washington has with any of its allies. Indeed, U.S. leaders of both parties have been unanimous in their public support for close U.S.-Israeli ties. In fact, when differences do occur between U.S. administrations and the government of Israel, the latter can count for support in the U.S. Congress. U.S.-Israeli relations, in short, are deeply—and, in many ways, uniquely—entangled in our domestic politics. The huge controversy associated with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s March 2015 speech before Congress is a case in point.

What are the key areas of difference between the governments of the United States and Israel? The first centers on Israel’s policies toward the occupied territories. The U.S. has long opposed the expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, considering it an impediment to any two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. A second area of difference is Israel’s opposition to a nuclear deal that the U.S. and its Western

partners might strike with Iran in the P5 plus 1 talks. Israel has strongly signaled its opposition to any agreement that permits Iran significant enrichment capacity. It is clear that the Israeli government would prefer a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities—preferably led by the United States—to what it considers a “bad deal” on Tehran’s nuclear program. The Obama administration, in contrast, sees an agreement with Iran as both good for Israel and U.S. interests in the region. And the administration is clearly loath to add a military confrontation with Iran to what is already a troubling situation in the Persian Gulf.

It is important not to overdraw the significance of these differences and of what are clearly strained relations between Obama and Netanyahu. Despite talk of a “crisis” in U.S. relations with Israel, it is inconceivable that the Obama administration will make a decisive break with the United States’ traditional support for Israel.

What are the ramifications of the rise of ISIL for the U.S.’s interest in Israeli security? Instability in Syria is a clear area of Israeli concern; rebel activity in the Golan Heights is of particular worry. Israel, behind its militarized border with Syria and possessed of an overwhelming conventional force, can certainly manage this problem, though it may be forced to respond to terrorist infiltration or rocket attacks should rebel groups like Al-Nusra gain a permanent threshold in the Golan Heights or, indeed, seize power in Damascus. Were Jordan—to date largely quiet—to fall prey to ISIL-like instability, Israel would be even more concerned: it has long enjoyed a relatively peaceful border with the Hashemite kingdom. The same would be true were ISIL to gain a foothold in southern Lebanon, though this is unlikely given the strength of Hezbollah—a well-armed and experienced Shi’a militia—in the area.

Stability

What of “stability” as a core U.S. interest in the region? This is a more complicated question than might appear at first glance. At an important level, the U.S. stake in stability in the Middle East is a contingent interest. It only exists because of the other interests it has in the region. The U.S. does not consider stability in West Africa a core national interest, for instance, worthy of the financial, diplomatic, and military engagement anything near what it has long invested in the Middle East. Moreover, the United States has routinely supported policies that have increased instability when it advanced the country’s other perceived interests in the region. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a signal case in point; so have been U.S. efforts over the years to undermine, through sanctions and occasionally subversion, the government in Tehran. The same could arguably be said of Obama’s 2011 call for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad “to go”; for all its brutality, the Assad dynasty in Damascus had imposed order with its borders and represented a predictable—if not necessarily positive—factor in regional affairs.

Still, the recent turmoil in the Middle East has surely taught the virtues of stability. The descent of Syria and Iraq into civil war has unleashed forces—most notably ISIL—that

represent threats, not just to the governments in question, but across the region. Iran and Hezbollah fear the loss of an ally in Damascus. Sunni countries—Jordan, Gulf Arabs, and Turkey—worry about ISIL spreading to their own populations. Not least, the sheer flood of refugees, particularly from Syria, are creating financial and, increasingly, political strains in neighboring countries.

The United States' interest in stability in the Middle East in many ways runs counter to its support for democracy and human rights, though, as we will argue later, it is important not to exaggerate the latter. One thing is certain: faced with the threat posed by ISIL, the United States once again finds itself depending for support upon the hereditary monarchies of the Persian Gulf and, further afield, an Egyptian government that gives signs of reverting to autocracy.

Terrorism

Terrorism has been a concern for the United States in relation to the Middle East since the 1970s, with acts including the October 1970 airline hijacking by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Jordan that involved a number of European passengers; the murder of the U.S. ambassador in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war; the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut; and the kidnapping by Hezbollah of several hostages. The threat of terrorism toward U.S. facilities increased in the wake of the Persian Gulf War with the bombing of the Khobar towers in 1996 and the subsequent bombing of the USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden in October 2000. While not directly in the Middle East–North Africa (MENA) region, the 1998 bombings in East Africa of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania underscored the growing threat that Al Qaeda posed to American interests and personnel. More tangentially, terrorist attacks by the PLO, Hezbollah, and Hamas against Israeli citizens have also highlighted this threat.^{4,5}

The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center was the first substantial attack against the U.S. homeland by militants from the Middle East. While this event did raise alarm, policymakers continued to treat terrorism from the region as largely a policing issue, with the FBI notably taking the lead in investigating this and other terrorist attacks. However, the events of September 11 changed the U.S. perception of the threat terrorist groups posed to the United States and, more importantly, of how to define and address it.

Within hours of the September 11 attacks—the most substantial attack against the U.S. homeland since the bombing by Japan of U.S. naval facilities at Pearl Harbor—President George W. Bush responded by declaring Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and those who shared its ideology and methods, as strategic threats to United States. The threats could no longer be handled as law enforcement exercises; they now required an offensive

4 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

5 Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

deterrent. Declaring a “global war on terror,” Bush, with bipartisan support and high public approval, expanded the U.S. military, intelligence, and security services focus on confronting the threat nonstate actors posed to the U.S. homeland. Bush went so far as to link nations that showed sympathies for, provided material assistance to, and harbored such militants as states that posed a direct threat to the security of the U.S. homeland.^{6,7}

As a result, a decade of costly wars began in Afghanistan and Iraq, and an “axis of evil” emerged with Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. In the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush argued—convincingly in the case of the Taliban and not so convincingly in the case of Saddam Hussein— that both states were sponsors of terrorism. In the case of Iraq, the Bush administration warned of the nexus between state sponsorship of terrorism and nuclear weapons. In regard to Iran and North Korea, Bush took a hard rhetorical tone, rebuffing Iran’s offers of negotiations and effectively confronting Tehran on the battlefields of the Shi’a heartlands of southern Iraq, and imposing sanctions against the oppressive and medieval Kim regime in Pyongyang.

At home, Bush—failing to heed the wisdom of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who warned decades earlier of the dangers of a military industrial complex during the first decade of the Cold War—raised the global war on terrorism to the ideological level, comparing it to the threat of the Cold War. While Eurasia and Asia Pacific were previously the center of gravity, this new war was to be anchored in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia. As during the Cold War, the areas most vulnerable to the threat were the United States and Europe.

In addition, Bush effectively linked terrorism to a broader ideological struggle for freedom. Linking non-state actors to their “state sponsors,” Bush argued that the defeat of terrorism required a change in the government and societies where terrorist organizations grew and thrived. Bush arguably believed it was in the U.S.’s national interest to use military force and diplomatic pressure to promote democracy around the world and through force, if necessary. In his estimation, democracies would ensure the U.S. homeland was free from terrorism and secure in the world.⁸

This over-expansive embrace of democracy as a national interest to counter terrorism and to secure the homeland led the U.S. into a costly decade-old engagement in the Middle East and allowed neoconservative ideologues to blur the U.S.’s true national interests and stretch the limits of American power. Bush’s “global war on terror” arguably had no end.

6 George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001, The White House, George W. Bush Archives, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

7 George W. Bush, Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy at West Point, June 1, 2002, The White House, George W. Bush Archives, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>.

8 National Security Strategy 2002, United States Government, September 2002, U.S. State Department, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.

He championed some autocracies while condemning others and ignored the potential blowback that costly U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan had on creating a new generation of individuals aligned against the United States.

Seeking to rebalance the U.S.'s expansive "freedom agenda" and "global war on terror," Obama moved more to the center on the U.S. response to terrorism. No longer calling it a "global war on terror," Obama committed to using the new security architecture Bush put in place at home and abroad to go after Al Qaeda and like-minded groups, but he de-linked the U.S. from Bush's costly "freedom agenda" and sought to bring to a close U.S. intervention in Iraq. He also, unsuccessfully as of the date of this report, sought to close one of the largest symbols of the Bush administration's "global war on terror": Guantanamo Bay prison. In his first visit to the region as president, Obama assured President Hosni Mubarak and other Arab leaders that the U.S. would no longer be a forceful advocate for democratic change. His relative silence as the Iranian regime cracked down after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections underscored this.⁹

Even at the height of the Arab Awakenings, beyond supporting Hosni Mubarak's ouster rhetorically and calling for Assad's ouster, Obama appeared largely disinterested in actively supporting any democratic change in the region. U.S. support to militarily remove Muammar Qaddafi in Libya proved to be the main exception to the norm. Under Obama, terrorism was fought through expansive surveillance architecture, special and covert operations including the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, predator drone strikes, and military aid and assistance to governments in the Middle East dealing with counterterrorism challenges.

Obama was initially reluctant to directly confront ISIL, believing this group and Al Nusra's growth in Syria and Iraq could best be managed through a combination of Iraq government actions and reforms, Kurdish military actions, and the fluidity and chaos of the Syrian civil war. Obama also saw Iran and its support of the Iraqi government and the Assad government through the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) as an active force to counter ISIL from becoming a substantial threat to the U.S. homeland. However, with the fall of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, the battlefield ineffectiveness of the Kurdish Peshmerga, the vulnerability of the Yazidis on Mt. Sinjar, and the growing tempo of beheadings of journalists and aid workers, Obama could no longer risk looking domestically weak and ineffective to the threat that ISIL may pose to both the region, the U.S. homeland, and its regional allies. As when President George W. Bush actively offered support to Riyadh as it dealt with the growing challenge of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2004, Obama could not ignore the threat that ISIL could pose to the stability of Saudi Arabia and Iraq and their oil resources.

⁹ Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on a New Beginning (Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt), June 4, 2009, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

Obama since the fall of 2014 has entered a new stage in the challenge of grappling with the U.S. response to terrorism and how it relates to both the security of U.S. interests and its national interests in the Middle East. Obama may in his final 18 months in office try to balance both the need to address this issue in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, and Afghanistan with the commitment to draw down and limit the costs of U.S. engagement. Such limits are always hard to draw and, particularly, with a Republican Congress and presidential elections in 2016 pressing on Obama to appear effective and strong.

Nonproliferation

The Middle East was not at the center of the Cold War nuclear arms race, except at the height of the 1973 Arab–Israeli war when the U.S. went to DEFCON 3. However, this did not make the Middle East a region that caused successive U.S. administrations to be concerned about the spread of nuclear weapons. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. grappled with the question of the future of Russia’s nuclear stockpiles as well as the nuclear programs in North Korea, Pakistan, and India. Iran’s nuclear weapons program did not become a substantial issue until 2002, when intelligence gathered indicated that Iran had begun a covert nuclear military program—though as a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Iran had begun a civil nuclear program in the 1990s.¹⁰

As will be discussed in more depth later in the paper, Iran’s nuclear program became the center of U.S. concerns about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, Iraq’s nuclear program featured at the heart of U.S. concerns in the 1990s under the Clinton administration and then with the Bush administration, leading up to the U.S. military invasion whereby Bush used evidence of Iraq’s nuclear weapons program as a *causi belli* for going to war. Both Clinton and then Bush sought at first to back the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the subsequent UN–designated attempts to monitor the dismantlement of Iraq’s weapon program, a condition of the ending of the 1990 Gulf War. With the U.S. invasion of Baghdad and the subsequent failure to find nuclear weapons, the Bush administration shifted its *causi belli* to the argument that Saddam Hussein was both a state sponsor of terrorism, and more importantly, an autocratic ruler.

Libya prior to 2003 served as the only other substantial case in the MENA region of a country with a nuclear program under development. However, Qaddafi came to the conclusion in the wake of the invasion of Iraq that a developing nuclear program was not an effective enough deterrent to potential U.S. military action. Following his own state’s national interests, Qaddafi chose regime survival over nuclear proliferation. As a result, this led to a brief improvement in relations between Washington and Tripoli after decades of hostility—with the understanding that disarmament would ensure the U.S. would not

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

intervene in Libya. However, this understanding with Libya fell apart when Obama chose to support the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011.

Countering the spread of nuclear weapons has been a fundamental national interest of the U.S. during and after the Cold War. The U.S. has sought to decrease its nuclear stockpile—the largest of any nation on Earth—since the end of the Cold War and to take global leadership during and after the Cold War to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in volatile regions of the world, in particular. Ensuring that states both honor the NPT and follow the treaty's obligations has been the cornerstone of these efforts. While this subject has been widely debated in relation to the Middle East, a reasonable fear is that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon could encourage other nations that are in competition to acquire such a weapon. Following this fear out to its logical conclusion, some policymakers warn of a nuclear arms race and potential confrontation between Iran and its geopolitical competitors.

In the case of Iraq and then Iran, U.S. efforts to counter nuclear proliferation have also been linked with other national interests mainly related to terrorism and the interrelated security of the U.S. homeland, and the security of U.S. allies. The U.S. even supported Israel's strike against a nascent nuclear reactor in Syria, another state that has posed a threat to U.S. national interests on more than one occasion. Understandably, the possibility of a terrorist group in possession of a nuclear weapon, let alone a biological weapon, could pose a severe threat to the U.S. and its global allies.

Others warn of the potential threat a nuclear Iran could be to the future of the Israeli state. The U.S. has publicly stated that if Iran produces a nuclear weapon or comes close to producing one, it will constitute a red line—and it is certainly one that Israel considers as such. Where and when that line will be crossed, and what response should be considered, are currently sources of friction between Washington and Jerusalem. Finally, the fear of Iran passing on nuclear weapons to non-state actors such as Hezbollah—an act that would be arguably against Tehran's own national interests—have also been cited as reasons for preventing Iran from acquiring such a weapon.

A counter-argument to a nuclear arms race, one supported by the late political scientist Kenneth Waltz, is that a nuclear Iran would cause both Iran and its political competitors to act more responsibly in the region, as evidenced by the case of India and Pakistan and the U.S., China, and Russia. However, in line with U.S. national interests, such a path is not one in the interest of the United States and has no real domestic support in the United States. Arguably, no American president could pursue such a policy.

Israel, particularly under Netanyahu, has advocated the first strike approach to countering the development of Iran's nuclear program. However, Presidents Bush and Obama have embraced engagement with Iran in the form of six party talks structured around the P5 plus 1, believing that the carrots and sticks of negotiations have more buy-in and effect non-unilaterally. Obama has arguably made the most progress with these

talks in light of his willingness to construct a multi-lateral economic sanction regime that has hit the Iranian economy and his warning that the U.S. will not take force off the table. Pressure from Netanyahu has also put heat on Tehran's past refusal to make concessions. In November 2014, the Iranian government committed to a preliminary agreement on the country's nuclear program. Factors that influenced Iran's decision included the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani, Ayatollah Khamenei's recognition that economic sanctions were having too negative of an effect on the Iranian economy, and the growing risk of a potential military confrontation with the U.S and Israel. A final agreement is expected by the summer of 2015. It is too early to say whether such a deal can be brokered, and the details of such an agreement could occupy a paper unto itself. However, at the moment, the U.S. has chosen to use engagement and multilateral sanction regimes instead of military force to deter Iran's program.

Even without a final nuclear agreement, in the short- and medium-term, the U.S. has succeeded in preventing Iran and its Arab neighbors from acquiring a nuclear weapon, despite Israel's own unilateral acquisition of such a weapon. Hilary Clinton, as secretary of state, floated the possibility of extending U.S. nuclear deterrence to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, the Obama administration has refused to do so to date; arguably, such a deterrence may have more of a symbolic than practical effect. However, it could be enough of a deterrent to prevent GCC states from acquiring a nuclear weapon if indeed the talks break down and Iran develops a nuclear weapon, despite U.S. and Israeli military and cyber efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring such capacity.

Key Issues

ISIL

ISIL's emergence as a regional and international security challenge came from the politics of Syria and Iraq, which will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

However, it is important to understand the larger context of ISIL as a security challenge to the U.S.—one that falls in line with the U.S. national interest of combating international terrorism so that such groups do not threaten U.S. soil. Interestingly, though, Obama did not initially define combating ISIL in terms of national interests. Rather, he spoke of it in moral terms, attempting to link the U.S.-led coalition's attempts to counter ISIL on the battlefield and financially (through global domestic law enforcement methods that stopped individuals from travelling to and from Syria) to a moral responsibility to both prevent ISIL from staging destructive operations in Syria and Iraq, and to curb its ability to possibly threaten the daily lives of individuals around the world.

At the same time, the president stopped well short of the expansiveness of Bush's terrorism doctrine. Instead, he considered air power, support for the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, and domestic law enforcement cooperation sufficient enough to address ISIL, without the need for substantial boots on the ground. Countering ISIL would be similar to his past efforts in Yemen and present efforts in Afghanistan, with a predominant reliance on air options. Ironically, though, Obama seemed largely disinterested until this point in the growth of the Al Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.^{11,12}

The challenge of framing these operations in moral terms was the risk of involving the U.S. in an undefined mission in Iraq and Syria without a clearly defined end strategy and benchmarks for success. Ironically, it is seemingly moral for the U.S. to take no action when Assad uses barrel bombs on his civilian population, but it is immoral and necessitates action when ISIL terrorizes Syrian and Iraqi civilians with beheadings and stonings. Oftentimes, when leaders consider their national interests in regard to a particular situation, they have to examine an end game that secures their national

11 Barack Obama, Statement by the President, August 7, 2014, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>.

12 Barack Obama, Statement by the President on ISIL, September 10, 2014, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

interests without overextending their state. Clearly, in this case, there is a national interest at stake. The ideology and individuals who join ISIL have attempted to upend America's core allies in the region, targeted possible U.S. allies in Europe, and may someday target U.S. soil as well as personnel and facilities abroad. By choosing pragmatism over strategy, Obama sidestepped the hard questions that follow when one defines the state's national interests in regard to a crisis.

This is certainly not to say that U.S. action has not been needed to support Iraqi forces in their attempt to reclaim the Sunni provinces, as evidenced most recently in Kobani and Tikrit. In the case of Iraq, this part of the strategy may have an end date if the Iraqi army by the fall of 2015 can retake Mosul—and if U.S., Iraqi, and Iranian military methods can be used to push ISIL out of Iraq or, at the very least, marginalize it so that it is merely a low-level insurgency that can be managed predominantly by the Iraqi armed services and local forces. The loss of Mosul would arguably also be a major symbolic blow to the floundering “caliphate” ISIL has hoped to create in the Levant. It has already had to replace its founder after he was incapacitated in a U.S. air strike; this will inevitably dampen this group's ability to become a strong recruiting ground for foreign nationals searching for their jihad. Beyond its wider air strikes and its training and advising of the Iraqi army, U.S. support in training and arming the Kurdish Peshmerga has succeeded in pushing back ISIL from Erbil and Kobani.

Obama's larger strategic problem in regard to ISIL relates to Syria. Unlike the case of Iraq, where the U.S. can partner with a state government to degrade ISIL's operating capabilities, the U.S. has no such partner in Syria. The U.S.'s late-term training of small numbers of “vetted” Syrian armed opposition members as a counterweight to ISIL in Syria seems to be Obama's less-than-promising method to address the absence of an on-the-ground partner to fight ISIL—and more importantly, to fill any power vacuum that comes from moving ISIL out of its urban strongholds. If these trained men prove insufficient, it raises the awkward question of whether Obama will have to take up Assad's offer to cooperate in combatting ISIL in Syria. The U.S. may also have to contemplate the benefits of the IRGC's role in countering ISIL in Syria at the expense of Syria's opposition forces and to the ire of the United States' allies. As evidenced by Obama's actions and public pronouncements, the president appears to have no real strategy related to filling the power vacuum in Syria that results with ISIL's retreat.¹³

The president seems to have no real strategy in place regarding the Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra—which is an element of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia's strategy in countering Assad—beyond initially extending bombings to their areas of control in northern Syria. However, the U.S. is now willing to tolerate the group's collaboration with other secular and Islamist militias. In contrast to ISIL, which has had poor relations with more

13 Helene Cooper, “Obama Requests Money to Train ‘Appropriately Vetted’ Syrian Rebels,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/world/middleeast/obama-seeks-500-million-to-train-and-equip-syrian-opposition.html?_r=0.

moderate armed groups, Al Nusra has worked in the past with other armed groups. Al Nusra's expressed goals and vision are largely damaging to U.S. interests globally. Obama has struggled to address this reality, and to disentangle Al Nusra from moderate armed opposition groups who benefit from Al Nusra's battlefield assistance and also benefit U.S. objectives in the short-term. The U.S. also wishes to not address awkward questions related to Al Nusra's funding, which has reportedly come from both Qatar and Turkey.

With no clear end point in its strategy toward ISIL in Syria, the U.S. may be drawn into an increasingly global campaign against ISIL as groups based as far as Libya, Yemen, and Nigeria pledge allegiance and other movements in the region and globally adopt the ISIL banner, methods, and tactics.

Iraq

As he entered office in 2009, Obama remained committed to the agreed-upon withdrawal of U.S. forces in Iraq by 2010, a deal brokered by President George W. Bush. The president initially hoped he could secure a Status of Forces Agreement, which would leave a contingent of U.S. forces in Iraq to help train and advise the nascent Iraqi army. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who faced deep opposition from Iraqi Islamic political leader Muqtada al-Sadr and his beneficiaries in Iran, rebuffed this request. Obama, who arguably viewed Iraq as a strategic mistake and one that was both costly and produced no real long-term value for the U.S., did not see this as that big of loss. The Obama administration was confident enough, though, to declare with the wind-down of the U.S. mission in Iraq in 2010, and now five years later in Afghanistan with a large security contingent still left behind, that he was able to close a decade of the costly wars that sapped arguably, in his view, in relation to Iraq unnecessary resources and too many American lives. The Obama administration was arguably comfortable as well with Nouri al-Maliki and his authoritarian leanings, as long as Maliki was able to keep the country together and Al Qaeda from resurging.

Maliki, who in many regards was a poor man's Saddam Hussein, sought to create an Iraqi state that served both his and his family's interests, and unsurprisingly consolidated in a very haphazard and disjointed manner the state around him. Though he lost the 2010 parliamentary elections, he managed to hold onto the premiership at the expense of his rival and Vice President Joe Biden's brief foray into the complexities of Iraq's parliamentary politics. Maliki did not take his electoral loss as an opportunity to broaden his coalition. Instead, he went more forcefully after his political enemies and, more importantly, further used sectarian politics to his advantage. In doing so, he deeply alienated the Sunni community in Iraq and began to face renewed security challenges in the Sunni-predominant provinces, which bristled at his Shi'a patronage and liberal prosecutions against Sunnis, whom he viewed as threats. He also became consumed with a standoff on oil sharing rights with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which

ultimately ruptured with the KRG unilaterally exporting its oil independently of Iraq's central government, until recently.^{14,15}

Maliki in the process, though, failed to build a viable Iraqi state with strong institutions. Parliament remained paralyzed; the joint-power accommodation agreement he brokered in 2010 fell apart; the judiciary was seen as weak; public corruption was rampant; ministries became fiefdoms for Maliki's family and political allies; and the Iraqi security and intelligence services became bloated, poorly trained, poorly managed, and corrupt. Most consequentially, they proved incapable of preventing ISIL's rise in Iraq.

As Maliki's inept rule floundered and, at times, flourished, Obama observed with cautious disinterest. While the stability of the state remained a strategic interest to the U.S. after the lives and treasure spent, Obama arguably never viewed Iraq's future as part of America's future, but instead a case where the U.S. misjudged its national interests. Obama also recognized the inevitable rise of Iran in Iraq, and arguably believed that because Iran had a larger stake than the U.S. did, that Iran could ensure Iraq's future to a large degree. Obama also seemed to underestimate the sectarian discontent to Maliki's rule and put too much faith in Maliki's ability to hold it all together.

The Obama administration was not willing to potentially confront Iran in Iraq over Maliki's sectarian governance if that meant it would disrupt the signing of an Iranian nuclear agreement, a core priority of his administration and a goal that fell squarely in line with U.S. national interests. It was not until the siege of Mosul in June 2014 that the Obama administration moved to even look at Maliki's governance of Iraq.

Obama's initial response to ISIL's rise in Iraq was that it was more of a problem of Maliki's governance and it required a political solution to the status quo, which ironically was largely welcomed by the U.S. in the past as long as it guaranteed the stability of the state. Obama called on Maliki privately and publicly to reform and, ideally, step down so that an inclusive cross-sectarian government could be formed. Obama arguably believed that ISIL was more a symptom of a sectarian government in Baghdad than a problem that needed U.S. military assistance, which Maliki hoped to receive without engaging in any reforms. Maliki's patrons in Tehran, though, looked on with increasing alarm at ISIL's surprising surge in the summer and fall of 2014, overrunning Maliki's bloated and largely sectarian army, taking Mosul and edging toward the city limits of Baghdad with the intention of confronting the Shi'a heartlands of the South. The Iranian regime provided the hard push that Obama's late hour public and private admonishments could not accomplish. Prime

14 Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: Routledge, 2013), Adelphi series (International Institute for Strategic Studies).

15 Toby Dodge, "The resistable rise of Nuri al-Maliki," *Open Democracy*, March 22, 2012, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/toby-dodge/resistible-rise-of-nuri-al-maliki>.

Minister Haider al-Abadi was chosen as a replacement to Maliki and the isolated former prime minister reluctantly stepped down.¹⁶

With this change in premiership, Obama has been quick to support Abadi in his efforts to counter ISIL. Kerry, so far unsuccessfully, has pushed for the creation of Iraqi National Guard units, drawn of mostly Sunnis in the Sunni western provinces, to become the new fighting bulwark force against ISIL and to help rebuild trust with the Sunni tribes who became disaffected with the Maliki regime. Along with relying on IRGC support, Abadi has also continued to use Iraq's Shi'a militias, which now reportedly are receiving arms from the U.S. In addition to deploying U.S. military advisors to support the Iraqi army, the U.S. has also stepped up its support and training of the Kurdish Peshmerga, who initially performed quite poorly against the ISIL advances toward Erbil. In the most recent campaign to retake Tikrit, despite opposition from some Shi'a militias, the U.S. provided air support for the operation after the coalition of IRGC backed Shi'a militias and Iraqi army units faced a number of setbacks in retaking the city. In future operations in Anbar Province and in Mosul, the U.S. will likely need to provide air support.¹⁷ President Obama has also recently increased the number of advisors sent to support the Iraqi army in Al Anbar Province, even committing to opening a series of smaller bases for training and operations advisory. Obama has indicated that he could further increase the number of advisors in the coming months.¹⁸

Viewing this change in government as a sufficient political solution, Obama has tended to view Iraq's future, then, in the same prism as he did before but with the added concern of ISIL. Any further steps to build a more inclusive, cross-sectarian state in Iraq will largely have to be a product of internal momentum, because the Obama administration itself has done very little diplomatically to suggest this is a priority at this current stage.

Syria

Four years into Syria's civil war, a peace settlement is far from certain, with neither the broad constellation of competing militant opposition groups nor the Syrian government in Damascus interested in a comprehensive peace settlement to end the fighting. Assad is still confident, despite recent battlefield setbacks and personal losses, that a peace settlement can eventually be reached on his terms, and views ISIL and Al Nusra Front's cannibalization and fracturing of the moderate Syrian armed opposition as beneficial in

16 Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq, June 19, 2014, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, accessed May 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>.

17 Anne Gearan and Loveday Morris, "U.S. plan to fight Islamic State depends on new Iraq leadership, Kerry says during visit," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-in-iraq-to-congratulate-new-premier-build-alliance-against-islamic-state/2014/09/10/dcf8c2c-38ad-11e4-8601-97ba88884ffd_story.html.

18 "President Obama to boost army advisers in Iraq," *BBC*, June 10, 2015, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33083359>.

the short-term for Syria's interests despite the continued blood-letting of the country's army. Assad, who is more pragmatic than strategic, considers ISIL's rise as opportune because he arguably believes that the U.S. and other regional states may be forced to enter a *fait accompli* with him as an alternative to a radical extremist state emerging in the Levant, which threatens America's core national interests in the region.

However, Assad's main playing card internally has been the so-far cohesion of the increasingly enervated Syrian armed forces that is down from 250,000 in 2011 to 125,000 presently, and that is struggling to replace its ranks with new recruits as a result of declining public morale in Assad's ability to win the civil war and amid the safety and security concerns of their own local communities in Syria. While some have besmirched the Syrian army as largely no more than the largest militia fighting in the civil war, its unity so far with no substantial defections despite all has helped the Assad regime hold Damascus, parts of Aleppo, the road from Beirut to Damascus, and the Alawi heartlands, including Latakia and Tartus. As the only functioning state institution in Syria today, with the Ba'ath Party, ministries, and local governance largely hollowed out, its cohesion partially ensures that Assad remains an important actor in Syria's political future. Arguably, as well, the break-up of the Syrian army could precipitate a deeper civil war and make any theoretical peace settlement unfeasible.¹⁹

Assad, though, critically benefits from substantial external assistance from Tehran's IRGC, which has played a critical role in supporting Assad's military offensive, and his ability to stay in power. Notably, the IRGC has played a large role in training pro-Assad citizen militias, comprised largely of Alawis and Christians from the heartlands of Assad's controlled territories and foreign fighters including Iraqis, Pakistanis, and Afghans. These militias have become as important to Assad's survival as the regular armed forces, as evidenced alone by their size, equal now in manpower with 125,000 fighters. However, declining public morale is also hurting recruitment to these militias, with minority communities reluctant to send its men to war. Inevitably, this has led to tension between officers in the Syrian military and militia leaders over both wartime operations and each of their roles in the future of Syria. Syrian army officers have expressed concern about the growing influence of Iran over these militias' operations and Tehran's investment in them, rather than the army. Hezbollah has also played an important role in the fighting along the Syrian-Lebanese border and have supported Assad's military campaigns in the south and around Aleppo. In many cases, Hezbollah operates independently of the army on the battlefield and is in command of operations, which has created tension with the army, which sees the sovereignty of its state being lost to Iran.²⁰

19 Anna Barnard, Hwaida Saad, and Eric Schmitt, "An Eroding Syrian Army Points to Strain," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html?_r=0.

20 Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria* (USA: Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project, May 2013), accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>.

The growth of these militias along with Hezbollah's increasing presence underscores, though, the reality that state institutions, including the army, are becoming eroded to the point that Assad's formal government is more a shell of its former self and his own personal future is guaranteed, to a large extent, by Iran and militias outside the formal institutions of the state.

Tehran's financial assistance and subsidized trade also help shore up Assad's finances (foreign currency reserves have plunged from \$30 billion to \$1 billion) at a time of sanctions and non-substantial economic activity and tax revenues. Russia's diplomatic support and willingness as well to continue to sell its arms and weaponry to the Assad regime give Assad important international cover and an advocate at the UN, which importantly has a veto on any attempts by the U.S. to build a multilateral coalition against the Syrian state. Russia's involvement as well in the civil war, as evidenced by its support of peace talks, allows Assad to have a powerful international actor defending its interests in these negotiations in international forums.²¹

The constellation of Syrian armed opposition forces remains in a very divided and disparate state, and with the broader political leadership in exile, the Syrian National Coalition is not seen as particularly credible with many of the armed opposition groups on the ground. More than 1,000 different groups currently represent the broad tapestry of the Syrian armed opposition, and these groups receive support from different states and individuals with competing funding priorities. As a result, despite U.S. efforts, nearly four years into the civil war, the Syrian armed opposition has failed to coalesce into a united political and military opposition that could potentially negotiate a settlement with the Assad regime.²²

However, recent increased coordination between Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia resulting in their enhanced support for a broad constellation of Islamist groups, including Al Nusra, has led to some notable gains on the battlefield in areas that the regime had previously held. Assad's militias and army both failed to hold the territory and have failed so far to regain control of these areas, even though the regime has responded to these gains by increasing the number of their aerial bombardments of the lost territory. These gains will be tested in the coming months as these groups face areas where the regime still has substantial control and areas where ISIL is in control; another challenge is how long this Gulf cooperation continues without further differences emerging. Differences also could emerge within this coalition as a result of Al Nusra playing a larger role.²³

21 Joseph Bahout, "Russia and Iran Step Into Syria's Diplomatic Vacuum," *Syria in Crisis* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), December 30, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57621>.

22 Neil MacFarquhar, "After a Year, Deep Divisions Hobble Syria's Opposition," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2012, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/24/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-is-hobbled-by-deep-divisions.html>.

23 Barnard, Saad, and Schmitt, "An Eroding Syrian Army"; Ben Hubbard and Anne Barnard, "Clashing Goals in Syria Strikes Bedevil Obama," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/world/middleeast/clashing-goals-in-syria-strikes-put-us-in-fix.html>.

The state, then, of Syria's civil war leaves Obama very reluctant to deepen his involvement in the state beyond providing humanitarian aid assistance, limited training of the Syrian armed moderate opposition, support for Syria's neighbors, and airstrikes against ISIL positions in Syria. While the new gains by the predominant Islamist coalition is putting pressure on Assad and, to a degree, ISIL, this new coalition makes the president even more reluctant politically to be seen directly supporting a coalition that includes Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria and that does not share the United States' interests.

Looking at the state of the conflict, it is not very surprising that Obama—who has sought to extricate the U.S. from costly wars in the Middle East and who has arguably never seen the strategic value, nor practical value, of what U.S. assistance can do in Syria—has not taken more pro-active action. As many of his advisors have noted, Syria is a complex problem; it is not easily discernable what action the U.S. could take to make a substantive difference in the civil war. Arguably, in Obama's estimation, the conflict dynamics are largely beyond the control of the U.S. and even if the U.S. were to take the costly steps of intervening militarily, which he neither wishes to do nor has the public support for, the U.S. would likely be drawn into a multi-year civil war without any clear exit strategy. Obama has arguably concluded, then, that the best strategy is one of supporting a diplomatic settlement along the Geneva Accords, which has so far failed to bear any fruit, and to concentrate U.S. efforts in Syria on containing and, ideally, eradicating ISIL (which symbolically captured the city of Palmyra at the end of May 2015). The half-measures the Obama administration has reluctantly taken to train a few thousand Syrian opposition are, arguably, an attempt to both back groups that could potentially fight on the ground against ISIL and put a pinprick of pressure on the Assad regime.²⁴

The only real anomaly to this course of action was the U.S. response to Assad's use of chemical weapons in August 2013. However, the president made very clear—even as he was considering taking military action—that such actions were more in response to the use of chemical weapons and the prevention of chemical weapons, issues that for the U.S., needed to be addressed, as they involved a fundamental national interest globally (preventing the spread and use of chemical weapons) and a violation of a moral values principle. The president had also publicly warned that the use of a chemical weapon was a “red line.” Arguably, he expected that he would never have to act on such a threat. When Russian President Vladimir Putin successfully brokered an agreement whereby Assad would disarm, Obama was saved from acting on enforcing this red line, which had limited public support in the U.S. and substantially less support globally. Obama still has left on the table the use of chemical weapons as a cause for strikes if Assad does indeed use them again, but so far, Assad has not taken such a course.²⁵

24 Thomas L. Friedman, “Obama on the World: President Obama Talks to Thomas L. Friedman About Iraq, Putin and Israel,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html>.

25 Evan Osnos, “In the Land of the Possible: Samantha Power has the President's Ear. To What End?” *New Yorker*, December 22, 2014, accessed May 26, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/land-possible>.

This policy of supporting the status quo, despite its substantial impact on Syria's neighbors in terms of refugees and that presents new security challenges for them in terms of ISIL most prominently, will unlikely be derailed by pressure from regional and international allies to take more action. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has been pressing for a U.S. air campaign focused on both Assad and ISIL. Both Riyadh and Doha have also pressed for a greater focus on Assad, but so far, Obama has only offered limited training for the Syrian armed opposition, which could be used in theory to pressure Assad and, more importantly, ISIL. The president has arguably been willing to let Syria's fighting continue, concluding still that the U.S. has no real national interest at stake in Syria.

The area where Obama remains most vulnerable on this strategy and that falls in line with the United States' larger national interests is the stability of Syria's neighbors, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and Iraq. New security challenges emanating from Syria that threaten the stability of Jordan, the security of Israel, and the post-civil war status quo in Lebanon would be detrimental to the United States' long-term national interests in the region. Syria's civil war also threatens the stability and security of core U.S. allies in the region and has turned Syria into a breeding ground for extremists who could someday target not only U.S. personnel and facilities in the region, but also the homeland. The growing refugee population in Syria's neighboring states also poses a challenge for the stability of these states, whose existing struggles with socio-economic challenges in governing their own populations are now exacerbated even further by the economic and social pressures of hosting large refugee communities. With the prospects of returning home dwindling by the day, a generation of Syrians is growing up without access to education and job opportunities. Unless these communities are given such opportunities or given opportunities in other states, the chance that members of these communities may turn to extremist groups grows by the day and poses a threat to the stability of U.S. allies and possibly the homeland in the future.²⁶

Iran

Current U.S.-Iranian relations are a paradox. On the one hand, the U.S. has taken the lead in organizing punishing sanctions against Iran aimed at forcing Tehran to curtail its nuclear program. On the other hand, the United States and Iran have become unlikely de facto allies in the struggle against ISIL.

The latter development is astonishing. Iran—a country with which we have not had diplomatic relations in 35 years—is today one of the most important, if informal, partners

²⁶ Fred Dews, "Syria's Refugee Crisis Threatens Regional Stability," Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement, February 21, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/02/syria-refugee-crisis-threatens-regional-stability>; Benedetta Berti, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications*, (The Institute for National Security Studies, January 2015), accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan17_4ENG_7_Berti.pdf.

in the international coalition assembled by the United States to stop and roll back gains by ISIL in Iraq. The reasons are simple. Iran has close ties to Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government. Moreover, Tehran is willing to provide training, advisors, and even military personnel to the Iraqi government in its struggle to contain ISIL. While there is no official coordination of U.S. and Iranian efforts in Iraq, there is clearly informal consultation, some of it direct and some through interlocutors in the Iraqi government.

Tehran is also a major supporter of the Assad regime in Damascus. Here, the convergence of U.S. and Iranian interests is less clear. The United States has called for the departure of Assad. But, under Obama, the U.S. is clearly wary of involving itself too deeply in the Syrian civil war. Moreover, the acute threat posed by ISIL has prompted the United States to take actions—including military strikes against ISIL within Syria undertaken with the tacit approval of the Syrian government—that have strengthened the hand of the Assad regime. The bottom line: the United States may wish to see Assad depart but, for now, its first priority is addressing the threat represented by ISIL.

One of the most troubling aspects of Iran's foreign policy in recent decades has been its support for the Hezbollah in Lebanon. Yet even here, the rise of ISIL has complicated the picture. Whatever Washington's views of Hezbollah—a stridently anti-Israel group that the U.S. has long designated as a terrorist organization—it remains a well armed, experienced anti-ISIL force in a fragile country neighboring Syria.

U.S.-Iranian cooperation against ISIL is, of course, occurring against the backdrop of international negotiations aimed at curtailing Tehran's nuclear program. The tentative deal announced in April 2015, though lacking in key details, reflects a predictable compromise among the various parties to the talks. Assuming a final agreement is ironed out before the June 30 deadline, the P5 plus One have secured measures—among them a reduction in enrichment capability and greater transparency in Iran's nuclear program—that would substantially extend the period of time necessary for Tehran to achieve breakout capacity for nuclear weapons. Iran, in turn, can look forward to relief from crippling multilateral and bilateral economic sanctions.

Whether or not the two sides will reach a final agreement by the June deadline is unclear. A host of technical issues remain unresolved. Powerful constituencies in both Washington and Tehran remain opposed to any plausible deal. In Washington, Obama faces powerful congressional opposition—including influential Democrats—to any deal considered “too soft” on Iran; were a deal actually struck, he would likely have to lift sanctions via executive action rather than congressional legislation. In Tehran, President Hassan Rouhini, elected in 2013, has invested huge political capital in the nuclear talks. He and other moderates see ending sanctions as both critical to Iran's economic health and a necessary first step in easing the country's international isolation. Rouhini, however, has powerful opponents within the Iranian political elite, including the Revolutionary Guard and adherents of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Moreover, both Israel and the Gulf Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, are deeply suspicious of any arrangement that leaves Iran with any significant enrichment capacity. Many in Israel see a nuclear Iran as an existential threat to the Jewish state. At a minimum, an Iran with nuclear weapons would end Israel's regional nuclear monopoly and constrain its freedom of action when it came to countering Iranian challenges to Israel, whether directly or through proxies. Riyadh is similarly alarmed by the prospect of a nuclear Iran, long a strategic and sectarian rival in the Persian Gulf and the Levant.

One thing is certain: a comprehensive failure in the negotiations would, from Washington's perspective, further worsen a complex and fraught situation in the Persian Gulf. It would, at the very least, complicate U.S.-Iranian cooperation on ISIL. But we should not overdraw the case: whatever the outcome of the nuclear talks, Iran would still likely see containing ISIL as a key element in its strategic support for the Iraqi and Syrian governments. A failure in the talks would almost certainly lead to calls in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere for additional sanctions and, perhaps, for a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. The Obama administration would almost certainly reject the latter, just as it would likely oppose an Israeli attack on Iranian facilities. But the pressure for war against Iran would surely increase, creating a dynamic where Iran, fearful of just such an outcome, accelerated its nuclear program—thus making outright military conflict between Washington and Tehran even more likely. Even short of war, an acceleration of Iran's nuclear program would surely prompt policymakers in Riyadh, and perhaps even Ankara, to consider acquisition of their own nuclear deterrent.

Many worry that a nuclear deal with Iran—and specifically, the lifting of sanctions on Iranian oil exports—would strengthen Tehran's hand as it seeks to project its influence around the region. Sanctions relief will surely increase the financial resources available to the Iranian government. But the effect of increased exports will be mitigated by the sharp decline in petroleum prices since sanctions were imposed. In addition, all other things being equal, an increase in Iranian oil exports will tend to further suppress prices.

Moreover, Iran's strategic position is not so advantageous as many assert. True, the rise of ISIL has certainly increased Tehran's influence on the Iraqi government. But that government, we should recall, is embroiled in a costly, bloody effort to retake huge swaths of territory from ISIL. The Assad regime, likewise, is perhaps more dependent upon Iran than ever. But that regime, in turn, is battling for its life with dubious prospects of long-term survival. The rise of the Houthis—an indigenous political movement associated with the Zaidi sect of Shiite Islam—in Yemen has, indeed, created a strategic opening for Iran. But even were the Houthis to prevail, Iran would only have acquired an impoverished, weak ally too distant to support decisively. Ironically, the best strategic outcome for Tehran in Yemen might be for the Saudis and their allies to broaden their intervention and become mired in a long and costly conflict.

This does not mean we should be sanguine about Iran efforts to project influence. It merely suggests that we must maintain some sense of proportion about it.

What of a U.S. rapprochement with Iran? The Obama administration has long signaled its desire for better relations with Iran. An agreement on the latter's nuclear program would surely mark an important step in this direction. But, even under the best of circumstances, normalization is almost certainly years away; Iran's support of Hezbollah and Tehran's unrelenting hostility toward Israel remain huge impediments.

Still, we should be open to improving relations with Iran—if only to increase better communication between Washington and Tehran during a period of high tensions in the region. Ultimately, a *détente* with Iran could provide the United States with greater diplomatic flexibility and perhaps even create the groundwork for an offshore balancing strategy in the Persian Gulf. This would give the U.S. additional options short of outright military intervention to pursue its interests. Such a strategy would not signify a betrayal of traditional allies, such as Saudi Arabia. Indeed, less contentious relations with Iran would almost certainly require that we give Saudi Arabia additional security guarantees. But a *détente* with Iran would surely make the U.S. less dependent upon Saudi Arabia as a regional proxy and more able to distance itself from Riyadh when interests diverge.

The Arab–Israeli Peace Process

The United States has long supported a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. It has undertaken extensive negotiations to achieve this goal under Presidents George H.W. Bush (the Madrid conference), Bill Clinton (the Camp David talks), George W. Bush (the Annapolis conference), and Barak Obama (the Kerry initiative of 2013–2014.) The United States' reasons are several. First, the U.S. has believed that a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute is a precondition to full normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states. Second, the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and, until 2005, Gaza has complicated U.S. relations with the Arab world.

Repeated U.S. efforts to broker an agreement on a two-state solution have failed. Indeed, such a solution is arguably further away than it was at the time of Oslo Accords 20 years ago.

At an abstract level, an agreement would appear reachable. Both the Israeli government and the Palestinian National Authority have formally endorsed the idea of two states (the position of Hamas, which has refused to recognize Israel, is ambiguous). Even Israel's commitment is suspect; toward the end of the recent Israeli election campaign, Prime Minister Netanyahu signaled his opposition to a two-state solution. Though he subsequently backtracked, his statement confirms what many have long suspected: that he sees peace negotiations primarily as a means to placate the United States. Whatever Netanyahu's real motives, significant and intractable issues nonetheless divide the two sides. Theoretically, the U.S. has vast leverage over both parties. Israel is a recipient of significant military U.S. largesse; more importantly, perhaps, is the diplomatic support that the United States deploys on Israel's behalf in international fora like the United Nations. The United States also has significant leverage of the Palestinians, who understand—given U.S. support for Israel and the power the U.S. wields in the Middle East

and, indeed, globally—that an independent Palestinian state is simply impossible without Washington’s active support. Yet the U.S. has never effectively used this leverage to broker a final settlement; in particular, the extreme sensitivity, in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere, to any perceived effort to pressure Israel has severely limited any president’s freedom of action when it comes to pushing the two parties to a settlement.

The time hardly seems opportune for a U.S.-led effort to achieve a two-state solution. The Palestinian leadership is divided between the PLO and Hamas. As noted, Netanyahu’s commitment to a two-state solution is ambiguous at best. Relations between the Israeli prime minister and Obama remain—to put it politely—strained. And the domestic constraints facing the Obama administration with a presidential election in 2016 are perhaps more stringent than ever. From the outset, many observers gave the Kerry initiative of 2013–2014 little chance for success; their pessimism was proven well founded. The possibility of any two-state solution is, at this point, an open question. It may be that the continued expansion of settler populations on the West Bank now means that the creation of a viable Palestinian state is beyond the practical reach of negotiation. We may well see a continuation of the status quo—an uneasy Israeli occupation of the West Bank marked by intermittent outbursts of violence—for years or decades to come. Palestinians could perhaps enjoy more formal recognition by individual states and certain international fora where the United States does not hold a veto. But recognition does not a functioning, independent state make.

In any case, the salience of the issue has declined. Events like the Israeli operation against Gaza in the summer of 2014 can prompt renewed sympathy for the Palestinian cause across the Arab world and elsewhere. Even then, Hamas could not count on support from Egypt and most Gulf Arab states, which perceived it as part of a broader radical Islamic threat. But other events in the region—notably the Arab Awakening and the rise of ISIL—have consumed the attention of policymakers inside and outside the region. Arab solidarity for the Palestinian cause has long been as rhetorical as it is real. Today, this is more true than ever.

Yemen

At first glance, Yemen is of only limited strategic interest to the United States. A poor country with only modest oil exports it is, in many ways, the backwater of the Arabian Peninsula. True, Yemen abuts the strategic Bab Al Mandab waterway that connects the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. But the United States possesses the regional naval and air assets to counter—quickly and decisively—any effort to close the waterway. However, the presence of active Al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen has led, since 9/11, to heightened U.S. interest in the country. With the cooperation of the Yemeni government, the United States has conducted extensive counterterrorism operations—notably drone strikes—against terrorist targets.

What of the current crisis, prompted by the success of the Houthis in driving President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi from power? The proximate origins of the crisis—which has seen Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states, backed by the United States, intervening militarily—date back to 2011 when demonstrations erupted against long-time strongman (and U.S. client) Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hadi succeeded Saleh in early 2012, but the fragile order that Saleh had maintained was never restored. In the protracted disorder that followed, the Houthis—with some, though often exaggerated, support from Iran—proved to be the most militarily effective of the various Yemeni factions. They have driven Hadi and his government from the capital, Sana; he is now in Saudi Arabia.

The Sunni Arab intervention in Yemen on Hadi's behalf is not just explicable; it is in many ways predictable. For Saudi Arabia, the prospect of a hostile regime on its southern border—particularly one aligned with its chief strategic rival, Iran—is unacceptable. Riyadh is acting much like any regional power would do under similar circumstances. The other Sunni states that have joined the anti-Houthi coalition—notably Egypt and most countries of the GCC—surely share Riyadh's concerns about Iranian influence; Egypt is, in addition, a major recipient of Saudi financial largesse. The intervention—to date confined to air strikes—has received U.S. rhetorical and other support, though Washington has stopped short of committing combat aircraft to the campaign.

The United States has little option but to support the current Saudi intervention. Riyadh is, after all, an ally and one, moreover, with which we find ourselves at odds over our policy toward Iran; given Saudi Arabia's important role in combatting ISIL, the U.S. simply does not need yet another bone of contention between Riyadh and Washington. In any case, the U.S. does have an interest in bringing stability to Yemen; chaos there only strengthens the hand of Al Qaeda. And, while Iranian support for the Houthis may be exaggerated, there is little doubt that a Houthi-dominated Yemen might give Iran yet another regional partner, albeit a very weak one. With luck, the Saudi-led intervention will weaken the Houthi advance sufficiently to give breathing space to ongoing diplomatic efforts aimed at crafting a workable framework for some semblance of peace in Yemen. At the worst, the Saudis and their allies—particularly if they introduce ground troops—may find themselves in a military quagmire. At a minimum, we should advise the Saudis to be very careful about plunging too deeply into Yemen.

A Question of Limits

We must approach U.S. policy in the Middle East with a firm understanding of the practical limits of our power to shape events there. The United States is, without doubt, the most powerful country in the world in both absolute and relative terms. In particular, the U.S.'s ability to project decisive military power across vast distances is without peer. Moreover, it has routinely deployed the full panoply of its strength—military, economic, and diplomatic—in the Middle East. The U.S. has military bases in the region. It boasts formal and informal alliances with a number of regional powers such as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. And, at least twice in the last 25 years—Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003—the United States has shown itself prepared to go to war in the Persian Gulf. In short, the Middle East—and the Persian Gulf in particular—is a region where the United States possesses immense power and has been willing to use it.

But how much does the United States show for its efforts? On the face of it, very little. The region is arguably less hospitable to U.S. interests than it was before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Today, the United States is scrambling to maintain the territorial integrity of a country—Iraq—where it has already spent over a trillion dollars and expended thousands of lives.

We may argue about the wisdom of invading Iraq in the first place. We can enter into what is now an extensive debate upon the success or failure of the 2007 “surge” or the advisability of withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq in 2010. But the bottom line remains: the experience of the Iraq invasion is a cautionary tale about the limits of U.S. power—however immense—to remake fractured polities. Afghanistan, where the U.S. has been fighting for 13 years without a conclusive victory over the Taliban, is another case in point.

One might contend that the U.S. response to such failures should be to increase the human and financial resources it commits to “victory,” however defined: more troops, more budgetary outlays, permanent stationing of significant numbers of U.S. troops in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Putting aside the question of whether such a response would merely mire the U.S. even more deeply in never-ending conflict, there is little evidence that the American public would support such a policy. U.S. power is not just limited by its ability to shape developments on the ground; it is also limited by the necessity of creating and, more importantly, sustaining domestic support for costly foreign military ventures. Finally, there are real financial limits to U.S. freedom

of action. After all, the U.S. already spends immense sums on defense; a major new military intervention would further increase the cost. The public might accept substantially higher taxes, sharply reduced expenditures, or the acquisition of even greater debt in a true national emergency. But there is little taste to do so, for the sake of yet another large-scale intervention in Iraq.

A healthy sense of the limits of U.S. power is imperative elsewhere in U.S. policy toward the Middle East. That power, for instance, has been proven—repeatedly—unequal to the task of brokering a comprehensive and enduring settlement to the Arab-Israeli dispute. The limits to U.S. power are also revealed by the persistence of radical Islamic terrorism within the region and beyond it. This is not to say that the United States and its allies have made no progress in their efforts to stem terrorism. But the truth remains that, over a decade after 9/11, radical Islamism is, if anything, a stronger force in the region than ever before. And terrorism, in the Middle East and in the West, remains an acute and abiding threat.

If U.S. power is limited, so is U.S. prescience. The Arab Awakening caught Washington unawares; so has the surprising resilience of the Assad regime. The sudden rise of ISIL also blindsided the Obama administration. Poor intelligence and sheer inattention explains at least some of Washington's belated response to ISIL. But another factor is the sheer unpredictability of events in a region as volatile as the Middle East, a place, it seems, where the United States is always being surprised—almost always unpleasantly.

This unpredictability suggests an approach of tactical flexibility as the U.S. reassesses the challenges confronting it and revises its policies in light of them. The “Obama Doctrine”—vague as it is—appears to embrace such flexibility.²⁷ Such an approach must be tempered by a strategic caution based on the limits of American power.

27 Matthew Yglesias, *The Vox Conversation: Interview with President Obama*, January 2015, http://www.vox.com/a/barack-obama-interview-vox-conversation/obama-foreign-policy-transcript?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=voxdotcom&utm_content=monday.

Democracy?

Democracy has been at the core of America's values, soft power, and ideals. Viewing itself as a "city on the hill"—and reinforced by its defeat of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan—America as a superpower championed the Atlantic Charter and FDR's Four Freedoms' goals of liberal democracy, global free trade, peace and security, economic prosperity, and self-determination. These post-war goals became the core ideological component of the United States' Cold War with the Soviet Union. Securing democracy in Western Europe, while tolerating authoritarian right-leaning dictators in the Third World who benefited from aligning with the U.S. against their own leftist orientated Soviet-backed opposition movements, became the marriage of convenience that ultimately benefited from the democratic movements in Eastern Europe and in Russia to which the U.S. provided assistance.²⁸

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the absence of a strategic competitor, democracy promotion became at the heart of the liberal internationalism and neo-conservatism of the post-Cold War period. The U.S. believed it had a duty to use its moral and structural power and authority to spread its values to the regions of the world that democracy and the free market had not yet touched or that were under transition. Unsurprisingly, many regions of the developing world that were used to the United States' less-than-democratic approach to security and stability in advancing its national interests were less welcoming to the changes in Eastern Europe, in parts of Latin America, Asia, and to a lesser degree, Africa.

The area where there was not any substantial change in democratic status was the Middle East and North Africa. As much as the U.S. trumpeted liberal democracy, in the case of the Middle East, security of U.S. national interests came first when it came to their stable allies, termed by author Roger Owen as "Arab Presidents for Life." As evidenced by the first Gulf war, one of the first post-Cold War conflicts, President George H.W. Bush had the opportunity to fully remove the authoritarian dictator Saddam Hussein in Iraq after the U.S. invasion of Kuwait, but he chose instead to keep in line with the United States' immediate national interests. By withdrawing from Iraq, leaving Saddam Hussein in power, and restoring the conservative monarchy in Kuwait, Bush signaled that the U.S. had no real interest in transforming the political system in the region to meet U.S. values.

28 Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Neoconservatives including Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, who chastised the Bush and then Clinton administration for not using U.S. power to advance its values across the world, criticized such action. In their estimation, the end goal of America's national interests was to secure its values, and by neglecting its values and not seizing the opportunity that structural unipolarity provided, these administrations squandered the moment. As part of the "Project for New American Century," writers including Robert Kagan would further chastise the Clinton administration for turning a blind eye to the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, notably Iraq and Iran.

President George W. Bush entered office with a much less expansive global worldview for the U.S., declaring that the U.S. needed to pull back from its over-commitments in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Somalia. However, September 11th shattered Bush's worldview and transformed it. Embracing neo-conservatism and his own "freedom agenda," Bush saw the Middle East as the focal point for his "Global War on Terror" and democratic transformation. The U.S. began to take an active interest in the politics of the Middle East, and chastised states that did not commit to democratic reforms. Foreign aid began to be distributed with the intention of promoting democracy. States and their leaders towed the line to remain in the United States' good graces, including Hosni Mubarak, who offered to allow someone to run against him for the first time in Egypt's presidential elections. Iraq, though, became the focal point of this democratic experiment. Bush set his sites on bringing freedom and democracy to the Islamic Republic in Iran and Syria. Awkwardly, the Bush administration was confronted with the election of Hamas to power after the death of Yasser Arafat. In one of the most flagrant moments of the "freedom agenda," Condoleezza Rice even termed the challenges Lebanon was facing as Israel launched its 2006 bombing campaign to defend its national interests "the birth pangs of democracy."

By the end of Bush's second term, with the U.S. mired in a war in Iraq and comfortable making deals with autocrats such as Muammar Qaddafi to secure justifiable U.S. interests, the "freedom agenda" became less pronounced. Bush, as evidenced by his post-election memoir and his own remarks at the Baker Institute in November 2014, still believes in his "freedom agenda," but clearly realized in his final years in office the problems of governing with such an agenda.²⁹

Obama, as noted, quickly dispensed with the "freedom agenda," and only cautiously and inconsistently embraced the democratic upsurge in 2011, or the Arab Awakening, which some commentators confidently called the region's "Berlin Wall moment." No true democracies, except for a struggling Tunisia, emerged. Iraq, since the U.S. invasion in 2003, is no closer to democracy than it was under Maliki, but at least it is moving toward a more autocratic cross-sectarian balance of power.

29 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010).

A question, then, should be asked: Is it in the interests of the U.S. to promote democracy in a region that both distrusts the United States' perceived "democracy promotion" and does not have the liberal democratic tradition nor the institutions or civil society to support it, except for the case of Israel and, to a degree, Lebanon?

An optimist's view is that liberal democracy provides opportunities many of these regimes do not offer their people, and the U.S. can offer opportunities to champion such values in some cases—an idea that is at the core of America's national identity. However, such opportunities need to be measured by the wisdom of the United States' national interests and the natural constraints these interests put on its freedom to act. In that space where the U.S. can champion democratic values, but not at the expense of U.S. national interests, there is an opportunity. However, any such actions need to always be measured by the U.S. national interest and the wisdom of restraint. By privileging America's values over its national interests and raising them to an unassailable moral level, the possibility exists for the U.S. to take actions unconstrained by any limits, which would inevitably then draw Washington into costly excursions that leave the U.S. economy burdened and international position vulnerable to over-extension. As much as democracy is a value that can be promoted in certain cases, democracy promotion as a component of American power must be exercised with restraint and always as a second priority to U.S. national interests.

A Path Forward?

Where does this discussion of core interests, key issues, and the limits of power leave us? One thing is certain about U.S. policies toward a most uncertain region: given the complexities involved, there is no plausible course that offers an easy, enduring solution to the quandaries we face in the Middle East. Our general interests conflict; the specific challenges we face can demand painful trade-offs; how we choose to exercise our power depends upon a complex and frequent, contestable calculus of cost and benefit; any policies we pursue—particularly if they demand high-cost, open-ended commitments—must factor in the necessity of public support. Not least, the very unpredictability of events in the region means that any strategy will almost certainly require revision and perhaps reversal at some point in the future. In short, the Middle East is a mess; there should be no surprise that U.S. strategy toward it will be messy.

At one level, this complexity and unpredictability argues for the Obama administration's largely cautious approach to the region. While “don't do stupid sh*t” may not represent a strategy, it is an important first—but only first—step in developing one.³⁰ For all the Obama administration's faults, we should always recall, its caution has at least prevented it from committing so costly and consequential error as the Bush administration's ill-considered decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Still, the Obama administration's approach has revealed at times something more than laudable caution; it has often been slow to react to evolving circumstances, haphazard when it does respond, and prey to rhetorical overreach.

Iraq

The current ISIL threat to Iraq is surely the most urgent challenge facing the United States. The United States' first priority is to protect the oil-producing Shi'a regions in the south and the Kurdish north. Here, the U.S. is fortunate. Despite significant ISIL gains, both the Shi'a south and the Kurdish north appear willing and—with help from the United States and, in the case of the Shi'a south, Iran—able to defend themselves from more severe encroachments from ISIL. Retaking largely Sunni Arab areas currently held by ISIL—notably Mosul—is another and altogether more difficult matter. Supporting local Sunni Arab opposition to ISIL will prove key. Gaining such support will require

30 “Obama to Detail a Broader Foreign Policy Agenda,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/world/obama-to-detail-a-broader-foreign-policy-agenda.html?_r=0.

not just assistance from the United States, but further efforts to make the current Iraqi government more inclusive in its composition and less sectarian in its actions. Tactically, ISIL appears still a threat with the capture of Ramadi despite concerted efforts by Iraq's elite counter-terrorism brigades to hold the city at the end of May 2015. Officials at the Pentagon have acknowledged that it will take until August for the Iraqi army to be sufficiently trained to launch a counter-offensive. Shi'a militias have also had mixed successes fighting outside of their own territory. However, the earlier fall of Tikrit—achieved by a mix of U.S. air power, Iraqi government forces, and mainly Shi'a militia—shows that ISIL is vulnerable to conventional attack. In the meanwhile, we must inure ourselves to the temporary de facto partition of Iraq.

The Obama administration is right in its efforts to assemble the broadest possible coalition to combat ISIL in Iraq. Much of this international support, though welcome, is more symbolic than real. When it comes to material support—both financial and material—for the Iraqi government, only a few countries are important, chief among them Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Even here the positions of potential allies are ambiguous. Saudi Arabia continues to see the Iraqi government as a client of Riyadh's strategic and sectarian rival, Iran. And Turkey, despite improved ties to Iraqi Kurdistan, remains nervous about its own Kurdish minority. Iran's membership in the anti-ISIL coalition—though informal—is also critical but, again, ambiguous. It is clearly willing and able to offer substantial support to the Iraqi government. But its very involvement raises concerns among both Sunni Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, and among Iraq's own Sunni population. It may be necessary for the United States to “up the ante” beyond its current, very limited direct military involvement in Iraq. But the Obama administration's hesitance to do so is understandable. Without clear, limited goals with a plausible exit strategy, the deployment of significant ground troops risks drawing the United States yet again into an Iraqi quagmire. This suggests that any escalation—barring, say, the imminent collapse of the Iraqi government in the south or Iraqi Kurdistan in the north—should be limited to providing additional air support, arms, intelligence, and finance. There might well be need for greater U.S. resort to special forces operations. By their very limited scope and duration, such operations are less likely to lead to mission creep. But we should avoid using U.S. troops to take and, particularly, hold territory. The U.S. has tried this before, after all, and it has failed.

The bottom line: the U.S. needs to be realistic about what it can accomplish in Iraq. Containment of ISIL comes first; without the introduction of substantial U.S. ground forces, retaking Sunni areas will be a long-term project; even should major population centers be occupied by anti-ISIL forces, the U.S. can expect continued low-level combat; and the arming of anti-ISIL Sunni Arabs may simply lay the groundwork for more sectarian conflict if and when the immediate ISIL threat subsides. The U.S. needs to disabuse itself of the notion that it can somehow make the fractured Iraqi state whole. Years of U.S. occupation—backed up by the dedication of manpower and money simply inconceivable in our current political environment—failed to do so. We are not going to do so now.

Syria

For the foreseeable future, Syria's civil war will likely be a present feature of the region's politics. Equally so, without a political solution to the civil war, Syria will continue to be a safe haven for extremist groups such as ISIL and Al Nusra. Even if ISIL is driven back in Iraq, the group will have Syria as a base for its operations for the longer-term, which means that Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon will continue to have to grapple with the challenges this group poses. Syria's refugee population will be a long-term challenge for Syria's neighbors, which are already struggling with mounting socio-economic pressures of their own.

While much has been written on the pitfalls of Obama's policy leading up to this point, it would be a mistake now to embrace the temptation for the U.S. to take a more proactive role in Syria militarily to help break the deadlock in the hope of resolving the civil war. It would be a mistake to fall for the interrelated temptation of removing Assad militarily in the belief it will lead to a resolution of this conflict in light of the myriad internal and external actors competing for power in Syria.

Creating a no-fly zone in the north to provide air cover for the Syrian military opposition that the Pentagon is training and to provide humanitarian cover for the civilian population would even be a great risk, and one that this administration and future administrations should avoid unilaterally. By creating such a no-fly zone, Washington runs the risk of indirectly owning, then, northern Syria and potentially creating a situation that further weakens the possibility of maintaining the unity of the Syrian state.

Diplomatically, Washington has no feasible path at present to broker a political solution to Syria's civil war. In terms of Syrian actors, neither Assad nor the large diverse body of armed militias and political opposition has shown any substantive interest to reach a settlement or, arguably, have the capacity to do so. Also, a number of these groups do not view the U.S. as an honest broker and have their own incentives to not seek a U.S.-led mediation. At the same time, the external states involved in the conflict have substantial competing interests that have not been able to be accommodated so far in these negotiations. Arguably, none of these external states have expressed any deep interest in making compromises on their own positions. They are still confident that the status quo is more beneficial to their interests than a resolution of the conflict that requires them to make concessions. It would be a mistake, then, to reconvene a Geneva III at this stage.

The U.S. instead should be mindful of its immediate national interests and other challenges it is confronting in the region. As a global power with global responsibilities, it would be a mistake to assume that the president of the United States can become consumed in every crisis in the region that has some implication for the United States' national interests. It would be a mistake, though, to fall into the temptation of not taking any proactive action in relation to Syria and to only react when circumstances urgently press for a U.S. response.

Washington instead should pursue a policy of enhanced containment that focuses on how the U.S., working with its allies, can better support Syria's neighbors as they deal with the security and socio-economic challenges posed by an ongoing civil war across their border. The stability of these states, which in the case of Jordan and Israel are long-standing allies of the U.S., is critical for the stability of the region and the protection of the United States' interests in the region. To relieve the pressure these states are facing, the U.S. should also consider ways to lessen the impact that the growing refugee population is having on these states. In the long-term, as well, it is in the interest of the U.S. to provide opportunities for this community so members of this community do not turn toward terrorism.

The U.S. also should not completely close the door in terms of its engagement with the different actors in Syria's civil war in seeking a resolution of the conflict. While the time may not be ripe now for such a settlement, in the future, there may be an opportunity for such a settlement. While Obama and his successor should not place too high of a priority on this initiative, continued engagement by the U.S. diplomatically, with the clear recognition of the limits of such a path, would be beneficial. Washington should continue as well to diplomatically support the efforts of the U.N. in its own attempts to broker a settlement, and also should continue to provide limited support to Syria's political and armed opposition. Arguably, both armed militias and political opposition groups are receiving enough weapons and financial support from regional states.

Finally, in terms of ISIL in Syria, Washington should expand its targeting of ISIL militants in Syria. While such operations are not a long-term solution to the threat of ISIL in Syria, the operations make it more difficult for this group to operate in Syria. Washington should also continue to target ISIL's ability to finance itself in Syria by targeting the group's oil smuggling routes and also banks, institutions, and individuals that provide funding.

Iran

Whether we like it or not, Iran is now an important, if de facto, partner in the struggle against ISIL in Iraq. The U.S. foregoes possible cooperation with Tehran at Iraq's peril. It may not be advisable to formalize that cooperation, given the hostility of Sunni Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia, to Iran's current role in Iraq. But the U.S. should surely work to ensure better informal communications with Iran, if only on tactical matters related to military operations in Iraq.

Such a partnership, it should be stressed, does not represent an endorsement of the Iranian government or its foreign policy. When it comes to Iraq, however, there is a narrow, but important, convergence of interests between Tehran and Washington. We may not like the outsized influence of Iran on the Iraqi government. But it is a fact of life—and one, moreover, that the U.S. created when it invaded Iraq in 2003.

It is plainly in the interest of the United States to conclude a nuclear deal that substantially extends the amount of time it would take Tehran achieve “breakout” nuclear capacity. The provisional arrangement announced in April 2015 is an important step in this direction. The opposition to any final agreement will be fierce. But the question is not whether any such agreement is the best we could have achieved; it is whether any such agreement is preferable to the alternatives. To insist on an arrangement that would permit Iran no enrichment capacity is, under current circumstances, to forego any chance of a deal at all. From Washington’s perspective, a complete failure in talks would a) lead to calls, here and abroad, for further U.S. action against Iran, up to and including a military strike; b) worsen the United States’ already troubled relationship with Iran at a time when Tehran is a critical, if informal, partner in confronting the ISIL threat in Iraq; c) undermine the government of moderate President Rouhani and strengthen the hands of hardliners; and d) delay any possible medium-to-long term progress toward normalization of relations with Iran.

The U.S. must of course be sensitive to the concerns of its allies in the region, notably Saudi Arabia and Israel. But we cannot permit those alliances to define U.S. policy when U.S. national interests are at stake; to do so would be to outsource U.S. foreign policy to Riyadh or Jerusalem. The idea that striking a nuclear deal with Iran would somehow represent “abandoning” Israel or Saudi Arabia is risible, given the United States’ long and tested track record of support for both countries. The U.S. should, however, be prepared to give additional assurances—including the possibility of a formal nuclear umbrella should nuclear talks fail and Iran accelerate its nuclear program—to both Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Turkey, the U.S. should reiterate that its commitment to defend Turkey under NATO’s Article V includes a response in kind should Iran use nuclear weapons against it.

Israeli–Palestinian Peace

When it comes to Israeli–Palestinian peace, the United States should be very wary of launching another high-level round of negotiations without a clear signal from both Israel and the Palestinian Authority that they are prepared to make new and significant concessions. Such high-level negotiations not only raise expectations the U.S. must be prepared to meet, they can also— as witnessed by Kerry’s intensive involvement in his failed 2013–2015 initiative—consume the immensely valuable time of senior U.S. policymakers.

This does not mean the U.S. should abandon the Israelis and Palestinians to their own devices. The U.S. can still play a useful role in defusing tensions when they arise and fostering cooperation on the whole range of issues—related to security, finance, and economic development—associated with Israel’s continued occupation of the West Bank. Even as the U.S. does so, however, it must prepare for the possibility—if not probability—that it may see a continuation of the current status quo for the foreseeable future. Given current dynamics—especially the continued increase in Israeli settlers on the West

Bank—it may be that the window of opportunity for a two-state solution will close. The problem: there is today no plausible alternative. A one-state solution, for instance, is clearly and understandably unacceptable to most Israelis; it would herald the end of Israel as a “Jewish state,” its historic *raison d’être*. In other words, the U.S. may find itself in the position of managing, rather than solving, the Israeli–Palestinian dispute for a very long to come. And the U.S. should avoid raising expectations—as the president did in his 2009 Cairo speech and Kerry in his 2013–14 initiative—that only increase suspicions about the United States when those expectations fail to materialize.

Terrorism

The question of Islamic terrorism is, of course, an acute one for U.S. policymakers. The attacks of 9/11 are tragic evidence of the extent to which terrorism constitutes a clear and direct threat to the United States. There is an abundance of evidence—as witnessed by the recent attacks in Paris—that terrorists have both the desire and capability to launch deadly operations in the West, even after more than a decade of efforts to root them out and degrade their capacities. Often forgotten here in the United States is the fact that, today, the vast majority of terrorist attacks are not carried out against the West but in the Middle East itself. To that extent, terrorism also represents a threat in countries that the U.S. considers strategically important.

Is ISIL a terrorist group? Most assuredly. But, importantly, it is more: ISIL is an organization that has proven itself capable of taking, holding, and administering significant swaths of territory. This, ironically, may also be its greatest weakness in the medium- to long-term. It opens ISIL up to conventional military attack—an area where the United States and its allies possess overwhelming force. It also means that ISIL runs the risk of alienating populations under its control. The bottom line: ISIL represents a composite threat. Even if the U.S. succeeds in pushing back its territorial gains, ISIL will still represent a significant nonconventional threat. Indeed, ISIL might become even more of a terrorist threat were the organization to face significant conventional reverses; unable to win on the battlefield, ISIL might turn even more to softer, civilian targets.

What should the U.S. do about the general risk of Islamic terrorism? First, we need to disabuse ourselves of the fantastical notion that the U.S. is going to “defeat terrorism” in the way that the U.S. and our allies, for instance, vanquished Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during World War II. Islamic terrorism, we should recall, is a phenomenon that finds root in the more extreme precincts of Islamic fundamentalism. The latter, in turn, has a long, complex and ongoing history that differs substantially by country. The idea that the U.S.—as outsiders—is in a position to decisively shape the course of what is, in many ways, an internal dynamic within Islam is not just far-fetched; it is dangerous.

This does not mean the U.S. is defenseless. Far from it: the U.S. can work with like-minded states to harden potential targets, improve intelligence-gathering, and use military means—notably drone strikes and special forces operations—to neutralize

dangerous individuals. The current crises in Iraq and Syria have again highlighted the importance of both limiting the flow of foreign fighters to region and closely monitoring their return. It has also reminded us of the importance of stopping private funding for terrorist organizations, much of it emanating from Gulf Arab states. Another and more difficult problem is the historic support, notably by Saudi Arabia, of fundamentalist Islam within the Middle East and beyond. Let us stress that few adherents of fundamentalist Islam, such as Wahabism, are terrorists or supporters of terrorism. But fundamentalist institutions—notably schools—provide a fertile breeding ground for extremism.

Above all, the U.S. must ensure that its actions, however justified they may seem, do not make the problem of terrorism even more acute. We need only think of Iraq: the U.S. invasion of 2003 helped give rise to the ISIL we are today scrambling to counter. We need not be paralyzed by the fear of “blowback.” But the U.S. should be acutely aware of it, particular if we consider policies that place large number of U.S. troops among suspicious Arab populations.

Oil

The interest of the United States in maintaining a secure supply of oil from Middle East producers to world markets is clear. Despite increases in our own oil output, the U.S. remains a net importer; lower prices are, on balance, a boon for the U.S. economy even though they might hurt specific oil-producing regions. Moreover, any significant decline in Middle East exports would still lead to a rise in prices. But the U.S. interest in ensuring the Middle East oil supply, though important, is by no means its only interest in the region. Indeed, the U.S. has routinely sacrificed that interest for the sake of other objectives. Over the years, U.S. sanctions against Libya and, until Saddam’s overthrow, Iraq, reduced global oil supply and created upward pressure on prices; so do U.S. sanctions today against Iran. In other words, the U.S. may want abundant oil supplies and low prices—but not at any cost to other objectives.

Today, the most immediate threat to the United States’ general interest in Middle East oil production is Iraq. Should ISIL make significant inroads into the petroleum-producing southern part of the country, we could see a serious reaction in oil markets. There is good news here: the richest oil-producing region in Iraq is in largely Shi’a areas where ISIL has little or no local appeal. Moreover, for all its many weaknesses, the Iraqi government—with the aid of Shi’a militia and Iranian support—has been successful to date in protecting both Baghdad and major oil-producing areas. The same is true of the Kurdish north, also the site of oil production, where the Kurdish militia, with U.S. air support, is holding its own against ISIL. Indeed, despite the crisis prompted by ISIL, Iraq today produces more oil than it has in 35 years. Should, against expectation, ISIL in fact directly threaten oil production in the Shi’a south or, to a lesser extent, the Kurdish north, the U.S. may need to act decisively, up to and including the (re)introduction of U.S. ground forces.

Another risk to the U.S. interest in abundant and low-priced oil markets is outright U.S.-Iranian military conflict. This would not just remove Iranian petroleum supplies from international markets, it could also lead to a temporary closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a key transit point for Persian Gulf petroleum. The United States would, of course, crush Iran in any conventional naval confrontation. Iran is simply in no position to close the Straits for any appreciable period. But oil markets would no doubt be spooked and prices spike. Such conflict seems unlikely at this point. But should the nuclear talks fail, we can and should expect a rise in tensions between Tehran and Washington. The U.S. needs to maintain informal lines of communication with the Iranian government to avoid misunderstandings that could lead to outright conflict.

Democracy

We have discussed at length the ambiguous history of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East. The overall lesson is clear: the U.S. has routinely subordinated its support for democracy to other interests. When it suited U.S. purposes, we have, in the past, supported strongmen like the Shah, Saddam Hussein until the invasion of Kuwait, and Hosni Mubarak. The U.S. has, however belatedly, come to terms with the coup that overthrew a democratically elected president in Egypt and made common cause with a government in Cairo with a dubious commitment to democracy and a poor track record for human rights. And, of course, the U.S. continues its close alliance with the monarchical autocracies of the Sunni Persian Gulf. Moreover, the United States' one foray into direct military support in overthrowing a tyrant—Libya's Qaddafi—has helped create only more chaos.

The U.S. need not abandon its support for democracy and human rights. But we should be honest to others and, perhaps more importantly, to ourselves that this support must often yield to other interests. At a minimum, the U.S. should reduce its rhetoric about democracy in the Middle East, much of which, in any case, is dismissed by many in the region as hypocritical cant. Moreover, the U.S. should focus its assistance on countries—notably Tunisia—that appear to have a chance at a democratic future. Not least, the United States should disabuse itself of any residual notion that the Arab Awakening represents an irresistible force for good in the Middle East. We are not saying that the cause of democracy in the Middle East is hopeless. But we are talking about a complex phenomenon, the outcome of which is unknown and unknowable.

Rhetoric

If there is one recurring theme to this paper, it is the extent to which the Obama administration's rhetoric routinely exceeds its willingness to act. Whether we are speaking of the president's 2009 Cairo speech, his declaration that "Assad must go," or his promise to destroy ISIL, the U.S. has all too often made bold declarations unmatched by the actions necessary to meet them. In the case of ISIL, the acute threat described by the administration would appear, at a minimum, to require a readiness to commit ground troops—something the president has repeatedly said he would not do.

Our suggestion: the president and his senior policymakers should be more circumspect in their language. We must, to the extent possible, avoid making commitments the U.S. is not willing to fulfill. They can send misleading messages about our intent; undermine confidence in our reliability; and unnecessarily limit the president's freedom of action. Such an approach would come at a price: the president could face criticism for his purported lack of leadership. But he faces criticism for his cautious policies in any case; incautious language will only give his critics further traction.