



# Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost: Principles for a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

Report of the Task Force  
on Managing Disorder in the Middle East

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## *Executive Summary*

Polls suggest that two instincts about the Middle East have come to dominate American public opinion: The region is the gravest threat to U.S. national security, and the United States should avoid greater involvement there.<sup>1</sup> The implicit tension between these views reveals an uncertainty about how, why, and even whether the United States should be involved in the Middle East going forward. And that uncertainty, yet again ignited by the Assad regime's April 4, 2017 use of chemical weapons and the subsequent retaliatory U.S. missile strike, has provoked a vigorous debate about U.S. interests in the region and the costs and benefits of engagement there.

This debate is necessary. Pointing to historical patterns of U.S. foreign policy is insufficient to guide future strategy or to justify new expenditures of blood and treasure. A realistic reassessment of what core national interests, if any, the United States still has in the Middle East, and whether those interests can be reasonably secured, is critical for policymakers charged with matching means with strategic ends, and for the American public, who is asked to support and pay for those policies.

The Bipartisan Policy Center convened this task force precisely to reevaluate U.S. interests, objectives, and strategy in the face of intensifying instability in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq. We have come to conclude that while the United States has enduring and largely unchanged vital national interests in the region, the strategy for protecting those interests must be updated in light of the complex and pernicious threats emanating from the region and a pragmatic assessment of how they can be mitigated.

The United States has a profound and continued interest in ensuring a reliable supply of oil from the Middle East to global markets, in countering terrorism, in opposing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and in supporting the security and prosperity of its allies. The Iranian government and radical Sunni terrorist groups represent the two principal threats to these interests, due to their attempts to destabilize and ultimately revise the regional order. While these two forces are independent actors, they are also inextricably interrelated: Iranian expansionism fuels Sunni extremism, and Sunni extremism facilitates Iranian expansionism.

These two threats can neither be ignored nor resolved rapidly, no matter how forcefully they are targeted. In the aftermath of the strike against a Syrian airbase, it remains the case that success in the Middle East can only come through long-term U.S. engagement that seeks to establish a sustainable order capable of resisting key threats at a sustainable political, military, and financial cost. The stronger the regional order, the less likely and less costly future U.S. interventions will be.

In pursuit of a sustainable regional order at sustainable cost, the task force proposes the following strategic principles for American policymakers deciding how to address the Middle East's challenges. In subsequent studies, the task force will propose specific policies that conform with these guidelines.

## ***1) Confront Iranian expansionism and Sunni extremism together in Syria and Iraq.***

Washington must disrupt the destabilizing dynamic between Iran and its Sunni rivals that threatens the entire region. If the United States tries to confront either ISIS or Iran alone, it will only empower the other. Moreover, both must be confronted where the risk is greatest, in Iraq and Syria. However, a sustainable success against these threats requires more than just taking Raqqa; it requires dealing with the underlying dynamic of roughly 20 million Sunnis living between Baghdad and Damascus.<sup>2</sup>

## ***2) Avert new regional conflicts.***

The focus on Iranian expansionism and Sunni terrorism, however, should not blind American policymakers to other flashpoints in the region. A policy that targets one threat but sparks a new conflict—whether among Turkey and the Kurds, Kurdish factions in Iraq, or Iran and the Gulf States—will not serve the purpose of regional order.

## ***3) Recognize Russia is not the primary cause of—nor the solution to—the region’s disorder.***

Russian engagement in the Middle East is adverse to U.S. interests because it strengthens Iran and only exacerbates the problem of Sunni terrorism. It is important for Washington to resist falling prey to the delusion that it can gain any advantage by seeking to woo Moscow away from Tehran—this will not work, certainly not at an acceptable diplomatic cost—or by counting on Putin as a credible counterterrorism partner.

## ***4) Pursue stability through inclusive governance.***

Neither blind support for authoritarian leaders nor rapid democratization guarantees political stability. But what does appear to guarantee instability, the one vulnerability that both Iran and Sunni radicals have exploited to upset the regional order, is exclusive governance in divided societies. To prevent this, Washington must promote credible, accountable, and inclusive forms of governance at the state and sub-state level.

## ***5) Prioritize order, not borders.***

Policymakers should promote power-sharing with a strong preference for maintaining existing borders. But they should not be absolutist. If stability proves impossible within Syria and Iraq’s current cartography, the U.S. government should no longer regard questioning of national borders as a strict taboo.

## ***6) Create common purpose among U.S. allies.***

Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States already share a common commitment to pushing back against Iranian aggression. Washington should both encourage and capitalize on this growing strategic alignment between our allies to contain Iran and lay the cornerstone of a stronger, more cooperative regional order.

By following these principles for sustained and sustainable engagement, American policymakers can help reverse the Middle East’s current slide into chaos and help limit the damage to U.S. security and prosperity that will emerge from the region. Failing to do so would only compound the threats, necessitating greater and costlier intervention in the future.

## *Current U.S. Interests in the Middle East*

Since the end of World War II, U.S. policy has consistently sought to ensure a reliable supply of Middle Eastern oil for the global economy and to prevent the region from falling under the control of any potentially hostile powers. In pursuit of this policy, the United States played an active role in trying to maintain stability, both between and, at times, within Middle Eastern states. Over time, countering terrorism, opposing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and supporting Israeli security joined access to energy as core U.S. interests in the Middle East.

But with the demise of the Soviet Union as a regional competitor, the transformation of energy geopolitics—especially, in recent years, as the United States enhanced its energy security—and the seeming inability of Middle Eastern states to sort out their own problems, this longstanding policy consensus has been increasingly questioned.

BPC analysis leads to the conclusion that while the strategic landscape has changed, enduring U.S. interests in the Middle East continue to demand U.S. involvement in the region. The United States still has a profound interest in supporting Middle Eastern stability to ensure the smooth functioning of the global economy, prevent the region from falling under the sway of anti-U.S. rivals, protect against the risks posed by global terrorism, stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and help defend U.S. allies.

### **Energy Security**

When the Cold War began, the United States was still a net exporter of oil. Yet despite this, American policymakers prioritized the defense of the Middle East because they realized that, were the region to come under Soviet control, it could have intolerable consequences for the economies of Western European allies who were dependent on Middle Eastern oil imports.<sup>3</sup>

Given the stakes, U.S. policy has long sought to ensure that no hostile power could control, and thus potentially weaponize, Middle Eastern energy production. In 1990, for example, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the risk of leaving over a third of the world's oil potentially in his grasp was not lost on American policymakers.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the United States has sought to minimize the threat to world energy supplies posed by regional conflict. That was the case during the Iran-Iraq war, for example, when the United States used its military presence in the Persian Gulf to prevent the escalation of a “tanker war,” in which the combatants targeted one another's oil exports.<sup>5</sup>

Today, in a more interconnected global economy, where the Middle East still produces 35 percent of the world's oil supplies, the consequences of a major disruption of oil exports from the region would be catastrophic.<sup>6</sup>

The United States, unfortunately, cannot entirely inoculate itself against the risks of such a disruption. Even if the United States were to produce all the oil it needed, it would still have an interest in preserving the free flow of oil, both because its allies depend on it and because oil trades in a global marketplace. Any drastic or sudden reduction in the Middle Eastern supply of oil would—whether by raising prices for U.S.-produced energy, slowing EU economies and their appetite for U.S.



products, depriving China of energy needed to produce goods for the U.S. market, or limiting the availability of fuel for the transport ships that enable global commerce—inevitably threaten U.S. prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

Avoiding energy shocks to the U.S. economy, in short, will require continued U.S. efforts to protect the free flow of Middle Eastern oil.

## **Preventing Terrorism**

The rise of radical Islamist terrorism as a global threat has given the United States a related but even more pressing interest in the region. Combating this threat is the primary objective of current U.S. military operations in the wider region, involving Syria and Iraq, as well as North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and elsewhere.

Critics may argue that the global jihadi movement emerged mainly or exclusively in response to—and is fueled by—the U.S. alliance with Israel, U.S. military interventions in the region, or U.S. support for authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia and Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Those factors perhaps played a part. Yet, for all the appeal of thinking that the United States could escape the threat of terrorism by simply getting out of the Middle East entirely, this notion is illusory. Radical Islamists have made it clear they have a vast range of “cultural” and “moral” grievances against the United States that would endure even if America dramatically reduced its footprint in the region. The ideological enmity that the United States faces from the current and rising generations of radical Islamists will make its interests and its allies a terrorist target for decades to come.

The first line of defense against terrorism aimed at the United States must be in the region where that terrorism originates. Continued U.S. engagement in the Middle East sustains the alliances, and military presence, upon which success in the struggle against radical Islamist terrorism depends. U.S. support can also help prevent the emergence of failed states and the resultant security vacuums that exacerbate the terrorist threat.

## **Stopping Weapons of Mass Destruction**

The risk of nuclear proliferation lies at the intersection of multiple U.S. interests in the Middle East. In the hands of a revolutionary and anti-American power like Iran, nuclear weapons would dramatically curtail U.S. political and military leverage in the region; put U.S. allies at risk and intimidate them into accommodating Iranian interests; drive up global energy prices; and likely spark a regional nuclear arms race.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is not confined solely to nuclear weapons or state actors. The use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict, by both the Assad regime and ISIS, demonstrates not only the horrors that can be wrought by non-nuclear WMD but the desire and ability of terrorist groups to obtain and use them.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, WMD originating from the Middle East have never have been used outside the region. Ensuring that this remains the case—and deterring the future use of chemical weapons within the region—will require vigilance, muscular non-proliferation efforts, and continued regional engagement.

## Protecting Allies

The United States has strong legal, moral, and strategic reasons for remaining committed to the security and stability of its Middle Eastern allies.

As members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Turkey and the United States are treaty-bound to come to each other's assistance. As a bastion of vibrant democracy in the Middle East, Israel shares with the United States a commitment to core values. Perhaps most important, however, by helping to protect and support its partners in the Middle East, the United States ensures that they will help to secure its own regional interests.

Since well before 2001, U.S. partners in the Middle East have provided bases, intelligence, logistical support, and, in some cases, troops for fighting the mutual threat of radical Islamist terrorism.<sup>11</sup> However, these regional relationships that the United States depends on are facilitated by the expectation that America will remain regionally engaged. Washington's main Middle Eastern partners—Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States—have benefited from U.S. military aid and/or defense commitments, and, to varying degrees, they count on U.S. support to face future threats.

Failure to confront threats in the Middle East can also threaten U.S. allies in other parts of the world. Indeed, among the most damaging aspects of the Syrian conflict has been the creation of an epic wave of refugees seeking safe shores and succeeding in making their way to European countries, subjecting those nations to significant security, political, social, and economic costs. At the same time, the war itself has been a magnet for European Islamist extremists, who acquire military training on the Syrian battlefield before returning to Europe, in some cases to lethal effect.<sup>12</sup>

By supporting its allies against the Middle Eastern threats that imperil them, the United States helps protect itself. And to accomplish this, the reality and perception of continued U.S. military and political support for these allies is crucial. Of course, that support cannot be unquestioning—being good friends means encouraging our partners to act responsibly both at home and abroad.

## *Iranian Expansionism and Sunni Extremism: Entwined Threats to U.S. Interests*

In the Middle East today, the Iranian government and Sunni extremists represent the two most dangerous forces seeking to destabilize and ultimately revise the regional order. They have driven nearly all the region's crises—Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Sinai, and the Persian Gulf. They are therefore the main threats to the U.S. interests identified above—not only for the damage they are wreaking on Middle Eastern order, but also because, inevitably, what happens in the Middle East, if left unchecked, will not stay there.

Iran is an aggressive state actor that has pursued nuclear weapons capability and is bent on expanding its regional influence at the expense of traditional U.S. partners. The current regime's hostile approach represents a near-term threat to neighboring Sunni regimes and Israel, and its destabilizing actions in the region present a long-term threat to Western and U.S. interests. Iran's primary weapon is demographic—Shiite populations and other sympathizers around the region who are willing to do its bidding.

Radical terrorism of the Sunni variety looms larger than Iran in the popular Western imagination, thanks to its ability to provoke deep, lifestyle-altering fear.<sup>13</sup> It thus represents an immediate and ongoing threat to the United States and its regional friends. Sunni extremists have proved capable of sowing violence in the United States and other Western societies and are already wreaking considerable damage in weak states across the region, laying the groundwork for more terrorism to reach the shores of U.S. partners and the United States itself.

Sunni terrorism and Iranian expansionism each have their own independent momentum, but it is also important to understand the underlying relationship between the two. That Iran and its Shiite proxies have at times joined the fight against Sunni extremist groups such as ISIS disguises the extent to which both feed off each other: Iranian expansion fuels Sunni extremism, and Sunni extremism facilitates Iranian expansion. This does not necessarily mean that a victory against one foe will suddenly eliminate the threat from the other, but rather that significantly limiting the threat posed by one will be difficult without likewise curtailing the strength and prevalence of the other.

To understand the relationship of the Iranian and Sunni terrorist threats, consider their symbiotic relationship in Syria and Iraq.<sup>14</sup> The initial uprising against Bashar Assad in 2011 was driven by the demands of moderate, including secular and democratically motivated, opposition groups seeking political concessions from the authoritarian government in Damascus. Assad himself, eager to discredit his opponents by presenting them as terrorists, released from his prisons many of the Sunni extremists who went on to give substance to his propaganda by eventually populating ISIS and other radical groups that became increasingly powerful among the opposition. As the conflict intensified, the rebels began to receive support from Sunni governments worried about growing Iranian influence and sensing an opportunity to topple a long-standing Iranian client. This support, both military and financial, was more often than not directed toward radical groups that, even before the emergence of ISIS, began to worry American officials. At the same time, Iran more than matched this sectarian escalation, providing increasing support for Assad



via its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian-backed, Lebanese terrorist group, Hezbollah, as well as Shiite fighters from elsewhere in the region, gradually reducing the Damascus regime to something close to satellite status.

In Iraq, a similar escalation of Sunni-Shia tensions ultimately strengthened both Iran and Sunni extremists at the expense of all others.<sup>15</sup> Iran's support for the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki enabled him to adopt increasingly sectarian policies, which in turn alienated Iraqi Sunnis. As Maliki arrested or purged Sunni rivals from the government, ignored pledges made to Sunni fighters in the "Sons of Iraq Movement," and gave free rein to often-abusive Shiite militias, he undermined many of the gains made, at great cost to Iraqis and U.S. troops alike, during the years before the U.S. withdrawal in 2011.<sup>16</sup>

Sunni anger provided the background against which ISIS was able to expand so dramatically in 2014, sweeping into cities like Mosul whose residents, while mostly resenting ISIS's fanaticism, still saw the group as a form of salvation from Maliki's abusive rule.<sup>17</sup> And, as in Syria, Iran capitalized on extremists' gains for its own purposes. While helping to replace Maliki himself with a less divisive figure, Iran helped organize the resistance to ISIS and ensured that, by playing a role in liberating ISIS-held territories, the Shiite militias it sponsored grew in power.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, when ISIS attacked the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Iran increased its local influence and prestige by offering vital assistance prior to U.S. intervention and at a time when neither the Iraqi nor Turkish governments were willing or able to do so.<sup>19</sup>

Not only have Tehran and Sunni extremists both exploited sectarian resentments and state weaknesses, but they also share another trait in common: Both are interested in fundamentally subverting and revising the U.S.-led regional order that has characterized the Middle East for the last 70 years. Moreover, while they have very different long-term goals for remaking this order, in the short term they both benefit from weakening it. Indeed, were the current regional order stronger, the risks of revisionism, from state or non-state actors, would be far less severe. As it stands now, however, Tehran has both created and capitalized on disorder to reorient the Middle East toward a new balance of power, while radical Islamist groups have used the same tactics to advance their goal of replacing the region's current state system with an Islamic caliphate. To preserve key U.S. interests, the United States must help the nations of the Middle East rebuild an order that is capable of resisting these interrelated assaults.

## *Sustainable Order at Sustainable Cost: Balancing Strategic Objectives*

Given the scope of the threats facing U.S. interests in the Middle East, American policy must begin from the recognition that there are no simple solutions. Yielding to the temptation to look for short cuts would, as it has in the recent past, compound the region's problems, create new and graver dangers for the United States, and necessitate greater and costlier intervention in the future. Washington will be forced to remain engaged in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

Success in the Middle East, such as it is, will come through pursuing a sustainable order capable of resisting key threats at a sustainable political, military, and financial cost. Vanquishing the twin threats of Iranian expansionism and Sunni extremism outright is an unattainable objective in the near term. The former is driven by the revolutionary, autocratic, and fundamentalist regime of the Islamic Republic; the latter springs from the ideological perversion of Islamism. Neither of these threats can be fundamentally defeated by the United States right now, but both must be confronted and reversed.

The dangers of both too much and too little U.S. presence in the region have been amply on display over the last decade and a half. Defining U.S. strategic objectives too expansively—seeking to overthrow regimes or instill democracy in the region—will doom the United States to an endless expenditure of blood or treasure as futile as it would be staggering. On the other hand, too narrow a strategy—targeting, for example, only a specific terrorist group, and not the dynamics that will lead another group to grow in its place—will only set the stage for repeated, and increasingly costly, interventions.

There is no magic formula for finding the right balance between these two extremes. Rather, it requires that the United States show good policy judgment, neither overreacting to nor remaining passive in the face of regional threats. For any U.S. involvement in the Middle East to serve the U.S. national interest, it must be simultaneously measured and geared toward creating conditions that can, over time, reduce the disorder and, therefore, the level of U.S. engagement to a level Washington can more comfortably sustain. Rather than the eradication of these threats, the United States should strive to defuse the dynamics that empower these forces of disorder while seeking to build the conditions for the region's states and societies to challenge, push back against, and, over time, resolve these threats themselves.

The order that the United States needs to preserve and rebuild to defend its interests must be sustainable both between and within states in the region. This means strengthening U.S. partners to directly resist the external challenges they face, but also helping strengthen their domestic political orders to protect against internal threats to their stability. If its allies falter, whether as a result of direct aggression or internal upheaval, the United States will eventually be forced to intervene in the region directly to defend its interests. Policymakers must devote resources to the region now so that such future interventions are less likely to be necessary. The more able the region's states become, the more capable they should be of organizing a collective defense against a growing regional power that threatens stability and against extremist non-state actors in their midst.

Helping develop an order that can, at the very least, hold its own with U.S. support, will mitigate both the threat and cost of future Middle East crises for the United States.

# *Strategic Principles for U.S. Middle East Policy*

The objective of building a sustainable regional order at a sustainable cost to the United States might seem like a long-term luxury that policymakers—confronted with the immediacy of the ISIS threat and Iran’s regional provocations—can ill afford. However, focusing policy solutions only on these immediate threats would, to paraphrase President Dwight D. Eisenhower, mistake the urgent for the important. Policymakers grappling right now with these momentous challenges should evaluate the potential courses of action before them on the basis of whether they would promote or hinder the creation of self-enforcing order of stable states in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> To that end, the following strategic principles should guide U.S. policy decisions:

## *1) Confront Iranian expansionism and Sunni extremism together in Syria and Iraq.*

In Iraq and Syria, both Iran and Sunni extremist groups have made dangerous gains in the past decade that will pose a profound risk to U.S. interests if not checked and deterred. The sectarian violence and instability spreading from these two countries today undermine the stability of the entire Middle East. This, in turn, creates fertile ground for the proliferation of terrorist groups elsewhere, and it provides further opportunity for Iranian (and Russian) expansion. U.S. adversaries have recognized Iraq and Syria as the crucial theater in which to advance their regional ambitions, and so it is here that the United States will have to confront them both simultaneously.

To reverse the damage that the collapse of Iraq and Syria has done to regional stability, Washington must disrupt the destabilizing dynamic between Iran and its Sunni rivals. If the United States tries to confront either ISIS or Iran alone, it will only empower the other. As long as Iranian proxies continue to oppress Sunni populations, Sunni extremism will thrive. And as long as Sunni extremists threaten the region, Iran will find willing partners in its efforts to dominate it. Because of the interrelated nature of the Iranian and Sunni extremist threat, Washington must fight ISIS with an awareness that its strategy for doing so will help determine Iran’s role in Syria and Iraq for the foreseeable future.

## **Pushing Back on Iranian Expansionism**

Already, these conflicts have advanced Iran’s longstanding desire to expand and deepen its power in two of the region’s most strategically important states. Indeed, by maintaining and strengthening pro-Iranian regimes in both Iraq and Syria, Iran has enhanced its strategic position enormously.

Tehran has used the current conflicts to come closer to achieving its dream of consolidating and expanding the Islamic revolution by building a Shiite crescent stretching from its own territory to the shores of the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> Its role in Iraq gives it significant influence over an important sector of the global oil market as well as, arguably, over Shiite extremists who have already threatened the Saudi government. And Iran’s position in Syria enables it to increase its support for Hezbollah and potentially threaten Israel across the Golan Heights.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, having already established a direct air link to move materiel to its proxies in the Levant, Iran is now on the verge of establishing a land route to them as well.<sup>23</sup> Its expanded geographic reach gives it further leverage against U.S. partners such as Jordan and Turkey, while its expanded influence across the Shiite world gives it added leverage in appealing to Shiite populations in Sunni-led states like those in the Persian Gulf.<sup>24</sup>

It would be misguided to allow Iran to consolidate these gains in the hopes that they could be offset by pushing back in secondary theaters like Yemen.<sup>25</sup> More than any other ancillary conflicts, Iran's victories in the heart of the Middle East give it a dangerous edge in its struggle for control of the entire region. Preventing Iranian expansion into Yemen and resisting its efforts to deny U.S. forces access to the Persian Gulf remain important objectives, but they will not protect against the most important threats Americans face. If Iran can cut off access to Iraqi oil at the source, for example, keeping the Straits of Hormuz open will be of limited value.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, thwarting Iran's ambition to upend the regional order can only be done by first blocking it from creating a chain of Iran-friendly states and militias across the Middle East's heartland. But the objective of preventing Iran from expanding or even consolidating the gains it has made in Syria and Iraq should not be confused with the attempt to eradicate Iranian influence entirely from these two countries, which have long-standing political and religious ties to Tehran. Nor can the United States wish away Iran's presence in the region—it has been there for thousands of years and it is not going anywhere. Instead, American policymakers need to sharpen their objectives. A stable Iraq and Syria are not possible so long as Iran arms Shiite proxies in order to massacre Sunnis. But an orderly Middle East could manage Iran's presence on the regional stage, so long as Iran's influence is blunted and subdued.

## Countering Sunni Extremism

The battle against Sunni extremism must also be fought and won in Iraq and Syria—specifically, in the wide swath of territory between Baghdad and Damascus, where approximately 20 million Sunnis currently live without any foreseeable prospects for coherent self-rule. As long as this population suffers from continued persecution, taking Raqqa, or even driving ISIS out of all the territory it currently controls, will not address the structural drivers of Sunni radicalization. Without a sustainable political solution for governing the Sunnis living between Iranian-dominated capitals, ISIS will inevitably be followed by a successor that will capitalize on the same opportunities and grievances. And, as hard as it is to imagine, ISIS 2.0 could be even worse.

This reality should shape the manner in which the United States confronts ISIS. Any approach that lets Iran dictate what ultimately happens to currently ISIS-held territory will end badly. If Iran tries to bring these regions under the thumb of its allies in Damascus and Baghdad, this would drive further Sunni resentment and lay the groundwork for ISIS's next incarnation. Alternatively, Tehran might see strategic value in leaving large portions of Western Iraq and Eastern Syria in the hands of Sunni extremists. The continued existence of a caliphate on the Iraqi-Syrian border would threaten Damascus and Baghdad, requiring both to remain dependent on Iran for security assistance, while also posing a threat that weakens and occupies the West. In either case, Iran would see to its own interests while leaving the United States and its allies to confront ISIS 2.0.

To prevent the renewed threat of post-ISIS terrorism and to prevent Iran from further expanding its control over Iraqi and Syrian territory, Washington must find and support sustainable solutions for governing the region's predominantly Sunni territories. As coalition forces continue to battle ISIS in Mosul and prepare for their upcoming assault on Raqqa, plans for governing these cities, much less the rest of the territory still held by ISIS, remain by all accounts rudimentary.<sup>27</sup> If the Shiite militias currently surrounding Mosul, or the Kurdish forces anticipated to lead the way into Raqqa, overstay their welcome in the aftermath of

these campaigns, the circumstances that initially gave rise to ISIS will be replicated.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, Washington will have to help craft some form of local Sunni Arab governance that can replace ISIS in both of these regions without alienating either Baghdad or Damascus. To this end, the United States will have to remain engaged in Iraq and Syria after rooting ISIS from Raqqa in order to support rebuilding, to maintain the anti-ISIS coalition, and to deal with Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus.

Taking Raqqa will not suffice to eradicate the threat of terrorism, just as checking Iran elsewhere will not defuse the danger that it poses to U.S. interests in the region. However, a sustainable success against these twin threats requires rebuilding an order that can withstand them in both Iraq and Syria.

## ***2) Avert new regional conflicts.***

Beyond the potential for the Iranian and Sunni extremist threats to linger, and even grow, after Raqqa and Mosul have fallen, there is also the possibility that Washington's focus on ISIS will blind American policymakers to the risks posed by other emerging conflicts in the region.

### **Averting Turkish-Kurdish Conflict**

Already, Turkish and Turkish-backed forces have clashed with the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) and the group's Arab allies outside the town of Manbij in northern Syria, threatening a dramatic and destabilizing expansion of Turkey's domestic war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) into a new theater. The risk of such a conflict has been apparent for some time, but Washington's understandable focus on taking Raqqa has complicated the delicate diplomacy that would have been necessary to forestall it. Yet the mismanagement of this conflict could prove costly to U.S. interests.

The YPG has relocated troops from its fight against ISIS to defend against Turkish attacks and, more recently, has invited Assad regime, Russian, and U.S. forces into areas around Manbij to act as a buffer against Turkey.<sup>29</sup> Moving forward, Damascus, Moscow, and ISIS are well placed to exploit and deepen the rift between Washington's two primary partners in the region and put U.S. policy in an ever-more difficult position. A full-fledged conflict between Turkey and the YPG would likely put any campaign against Raqqa on permanent hold. Cutting off all U.S. support for the YPG, as Turkey demands, would leave the United States without a ground force capable of taking Raqqa or even containing ISIS fighters there. Sticking by the YPG, however, could lead Ankara to restrict U.S. access to the Incirlik Air Base, further complicating the America's anti-ISIS campaign.

To keep U.S. partners focused on larger strategic threats, the United States should work to resolve, or at least manage, this conflict. Beyond basic security guarantees already given to Turkey—the PKK will not be allowed to plan or stage attacks on Turkey from YPG-held territory, there will be no transfer of U.S.-supplied arms from the YPG to the PKK, etc.—the United States should explore other ways to persuade the main Syrian Kurdish political organization, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to bring non-PYD Kurdish elements into the governance of the Democratic Federation of North Syria and to diminish over time its visible veneration of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan and its links to the PKK.

## Averting Conflict Over Kirkuk

Similarly, in Iraq, there are also clear fault lines that, if not handled correctly, could lead to new conflicts that would benefit ISIS and Iran at America's expense. The most obvious is in the city of Kirkuk, a long-standing flashpoint that has recently come under the control of Kurdish forces affiliated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two factions that dominate the political and security scene in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>30</sup>

Kirkuk, and its oilfields, now stands as a potential point of conflict between the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by the president of the KRG, Masoud Barzani. Regionally, it could also become a source of conflict between the Iranian-backed government in Baghdad and the KRG, as well as between Baghdad and Turkey, which has been trying to expand its influence through cooperation with regional allies. Were fighting to break out over Kirkuk, possibly in connection with the much discussed move for KRG independence, it could undermine the KRG as a whole. This would mean the end of one of the few islands of stability in the region and the breakdown of one of the few political entities that could potentially serve as a bulwark against both ISIS and Iran.

## De-escalating Iran-Gulf States Conflict

Ensuring that U.S. allies are protected from the threat of Iranian expansion does not mean endorsing a Sunni counteroffensive against Tehran. The challenge instead is to create a position of strength from which Washington and its partners can help rebuild a stable order that protects the sovereignty of legitimate regional actors.

Toward this end, by responding forcefully to aggressive Iranian actions, wherever they may occur, and conveying the credibility of its security guarantees, the United States can seek to dissuade Tehran from further provocations toward U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf. Likewise, Washington should promote more strategic cooperation among its Gulf partners, encouraging them to form a more meaningful and functional coalition. If they felt sufficiently secure, the Gulf States would not feel as alarmed by or compelled to respond to Iranian provocations. Further, by pushing its partners to meet the legitimate demands of their own domestic Shiite population, American policymakers can help defang the threat that Iran poses to these countries. Working to prevent escalation in the Gulf and around the region represents the surest path to building a stable regional order from a position of strength.

### ***3) Recognize Russia is not the primary cause of—nor the solution to—the region's disorder.***

Russia and Iran have shared goals in the Middle East that are diametrically opposed to America's, but the greater danger in the region is from Iran, not Russia, at least at this point.<sup>31</sup>

Iran has at least two client states in the region—Syria and Lebanon—is aggressively seeking to expand its influence in two more, Iraq and Yemen, and has the potential to destabilize others. Its sights are set on U.S.-friendly regimes in the Gulf. Russia, at least for now, seems likely to be content with preserving a Russia-friendly regime in Damascus that guarantees Russian access to Syrian air and naval bases. It no doubt also seeks some greater measure of diplomatic and commercial influence



elsewhere in the region, and this could become a much greater problem in the future. Both Russia and Iran see resisting and rolling back U.S. influence in the region as a primary goal, and they depend on one another in their efforts to do so. The result is a symbiotic relationship between two anti-American regimes in which Russian- and Iranian-led efforts to challenge the United States and expand Iran's influence in the region are also efforts that indirectly benefit Russia.

From providing engineers to help with the creation of Iran's nuclear program to providing air support for Iranian and Hezbollah operations in Syria, Russia has used its superior technological prowess to amplify Iranian power in a variety of ways.<sup>32</sup> The Iranian military has purchased weapons from Russia in the past and continues to learn advanced military tactics from their Russian counterparts in Syria. Russian air support has facilitated major gains on the ground for Iran and Hezbollah in Syria.

Russia, for its part, benefits enormously from the relationship as well. The success of its air campaign—both in terms of propping up Assad's rule and bolstering its global image as a major power—would be impossible without the ground forces of Hezbollah and other Iranian-directed, non-Syrian Shiite militias. Financially, Russia has been negotiating a \$10 billion arms sale to Iran, while the country's total trade with Iran rose 70 percent last year.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, however, Russia's influence in the region is heavily dependent on its opportunistic relationship with Iran. Without Iranian support, including the use of Iranian airbases and airspace, Russia's intervention in Syria would have been impossible. Assad also would not have survived with just the help of Russian airpower and special forces alone.<sup>34</sup> It was Iran's willingness to sacrifice a substantial number of Iranian, Hezbollah, and other Shiite fighters that was crucial to Assad's, and therefore Russia's, success thus far. Were Iran to pull out of Syria, Russia's position weakens dramatically.

Though Russia is merely an enabler, not the driver, of the violence and instability that has been unleashed in the Middle East, that does not mean it can, or would want to be, recruited into a productive, order-restoring force. Indeed, due to the symbiotic relationship between Moscow and Tehran, it would be profoundly risky for Washington to build a policy based on splitting them apart.

Benefiting as much as it does, Russia is unlikely to cut ties with Iran completely. At best, Washington could perhaps convince Moscow to reduce the level of support it currently provides Tehran, but this would come at a steep price. As compensation for giving up on its attempts to undermine the U.S.-supported order in the Middle East, Russia would likely require concessions that would undermine the U.S.-supported order in Europe, another region in which Russia seeks to extend its influence. This is too high a price for Russian cooperation. For one thing, trading one core national interest for another in this manner makes little strategic sense. For another, Washington would not get very much for what it was giving up.

As important, splitting Russia from Iran would, even if possible, be of limited strategic value in the Middle East itself. While the Assad regime in Damascus willingly accepts Russian assistance, its real allegiance is first and foremost to Iran. It is the blood of Iranians and their proxies, not Russians, that has been most prolifically spilled in support of Assad; it is Iranian treasure that has propped up his regime.<sup>35</sup> Faced with a choice, there can be little doubt that Damascus would remain loyal to its long-time ally, Iran. Thus, even if Washington should succeed in inducing Moscow to distance itself from Tehran, it would deprive Russia

of the very thing American policymakers would be hoping to achieve by such a deal: its ability to blunt Iranian control of Syria.

Nor would Russia be a particularly valuable partner in combating the other threat the United States faces in the region: radical Sunni terrorism. Russia has repeatedly justified its intervention in Syria under the rubric of fighting terrorism; yet, its actions there and elsewhere reveal the extent to which this is not Moscow's true objective.<sup>36</sup> Like the Assad regime, it has demonstrated an interest in attacking moderate rebel groups with massive firepower while virtually ignoring far more radical actors like ISIS. For Syria, Iran, and Russia, the presence of ISIS, in fact, simply provides cover for more ambitious geopolitical objectives.

At the same time, traditional Russian counterterrorism tactics have not proved successful. From Chechnya to Aleppo, Moscow has depended on overwhelming force with little regard for civilian casualties, an approach that only works to the extent Russia is able to redirect the resulting backlash. Most notably, the rise of ISIS has itself been facilitated by Chechen fighters who were radicalized by their conflict with Russia and who sought to continue the fight elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Russia also has little to contribute to the crucial challenges of governance in Mosul and Raqqa. To the contrary, its involvement in Syria has strengthened radical groups that pose immediate threats to Turkey, Europe, and the United States by helping to destroy the moderate opposition and by fueling Sunni grievance through its violent support of Assad.

In short, Russia currently is a threat in the Middle East principally through its ability to strengthen Iran. It is important for Washington to resist Russian influence in this capacity, rather than fall prey to the delusion that it can gain any advantage by wooing Moscow away from Tehran or, worse, by partnering with it to fight terrorism.

#### ***4) Pursue order through inclusive governance.***

Iranian aggression and Sunni extremism have metastasized into threats requiring U.S. attention due to the weakness of Middle Eastern states. Moving the region toward a self-sustaining order that can contain the rising power of a regional adversary and restrain dangerous non-state actors will fundamentally require bolstering the region's political entities. Therefore, policymakers' short-term focus must be on creating stronger states in Iraq and Syria while preventing the further erosion of an already unstable situation within allied states.

As Washington has painfully discovered over the past several decades, neither blind support for authoritarian leaders nor rapid democratization guarantees political stability. But what does appear to guarantee instability, the one vulnerability that both Iran and Sunni radicals have exploited to upset the regional order, is exclusivist governance in divided societies. Where one group has amassed power and bestows favors principally on its own, regardless of whether it is a majority or a minority, resentment grows among those being excluded, discriminated against, or oppressed. And as this resentment gains force, so do Sunni radicalism and Iranian aggression. Whether it is Iraqi Sunnis, who rose up against their Iranian-allied government; Syria's pro-Iranian, Alawite regime, which preferred to start a civil war rather than risk political concessions; or Yemen's Houthis, who sought Iranian backing against a Western-supported but imperfect government, exclusionary rule has been the necessary condition of all of the region's conflicts.<sup>38</sup>

To prevent this, Washington must promote credible, accountable, and inclusive, if not always democratic, forms of governance at the state and sub-state level. This can involve power-sharing arrangements between representatives of rival factions or the devolution of power to local bodies as the situation requires. In Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, and even Turkey, where elections belie deeply entrenched illiberal power structures, securing a basic level of power-sharing can play a crucial role in maintaining stability. Pushing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan toward negotiations with the PKK, or pushing for a resolution to the current impasse between the KDP and PUK in northern Iraq, represent necessary steps toward rebuilding functioning political institutions that can address otherwise dangerous fissures within the region.

The accomplishment of this objective requires humility and persistence. Political reform, even of the more limited variety, can neither be enacted unilaterally nor without setbacks. But it is not impossible, as the 2005 Iraqi constitution proved.<sup>39</sup> This document established the principle of federation and local self-governance, serving as the basis for a peaceful, if still troubled, relationship between Baghdad and Erbil. Moreover, the Iraqi constitution remains a potential blueprint for a long-term answer to the grievances of Iraq's Sunni population.

If some form of order is to return to the Middle East, it will require first creating more stable governing institutions. And if such political stability is to take hold in Syria and Arab Iraq, some variation on the inclusive principles enshrined in the Iraqi constitution, which has produced a modicum of stability between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs, is likely to be an important part of the solution.

## ***5) Prioritize order, not borders.***

Policymakers should promote power-sharing with a strong preference for maintaining existing borders. But they should not be absolutist. If stability proves impossible within Syria and Iraq's current cartography, the U.S. government should no longer regard questioning of national borders as a strict taboo.

Syria will not be a united nation-state for a long time to come, if ever, while Iraq has already had elements of federalism injected into its governing arrangements, as noted above. Reflexively maintaining the legal fiction that these states remain completely sovereign may prevent rebuilding a more robust order. As in the case of Kosovo, Washington should be open to the possibility that, in some situations, preexisting states cannot be held together exactly as they were before, and communities that have endured excessive violence at one another's hands may coexist better in separate political units. This recognition could lead to support for promoting federal structures or securing international support for temporary or permanent enclaves within existing states. And, depending on how things develop, changing formal borders should not be taken off the table.

At the same time, proposed changes in national borders should not be approached lightly or treated as a panacea. Any attempt to redraw boundaries to account for ethnic, sectarian, or other communal differences ought to be subjected to extremely tough standards to ensure that the changes will contribute to greater peace and stability as opposed to revanchism and violence. The former Yugoslavia also provides a dramatic example of how the reckless recognition of new states can create violence as well.<sup>40</sup> Policymakers must also avoid the risks of romanticizing the idea of national self-determination or ignoring a new state's ability to produce infinitely regressive claims by newly empowered sub-groups and factions.

Most importantly, American policymakers should ensure that any changes come in response to the demands of the concerned populations. Borders imposed from the outside will generate resentment even when drawn with the best of intentions. To the extent it is feasible, boundary changes should be made with the agreement of all existing political entities involved and should be preceded by robust negotiations among them.

### ***6) Create common purpose among U.S. allies.***

Where possible, American policymakers should also go beyond conflict avoidance to create a common purpose for U.S. allies. In mobilizing to defend U.S. interests in the region beyond the crucible of Iraq and Syria, Washington can benefit from a growing alignment of interests. Already, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Gulf States have become politically closer than ever before in response to a shared Iranian threat.<sup>41</sup> U.S. policy should seek to capitalize on this development. This could involve fostering military cooperation—for example, efforts to jointly develop and deploy missile-defense systems—as well as encouraging, to the extent possible, diplomatic steps to normalize relations between Israel and America’s Sunni partners. The most robust imaginable forms of this cooperation may not be possible absent a solution to the Palestinian problem, though, given the stakes, the relevant Arab parties seem willing to engage in intense forms of cooperation with Israel. And, of course, policymakers should remain attuned to the possibility that creating a united front against common threats could facilitate—not merely be facilitated by—progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

## Conclusion

Pursuing a sustainable order in the Middle East in the face of serious threats will require a sustained U.S. commitment. But the alternative is the collapse of what order remains today. Instability in the Middle East will put America's allies, America's economy, and, ultimately, America's security in jeopardy. To prevent this, American policymakers must invest the resources necessary to confront Iranian expansionism and radical Sunni extremism while doing so is still feasible.

This effort begins with a simultaneous effort to address both threats in the crucial theater of Syria and Iraq, pushing back against Iran and finding a solution to Sunni disenfranchisement. It requires the United States to prevent the emergence of new conflicts in the region and work to resolve existing ones, between Turks and Kurds, for example. In doing so, Washington must also remain attuned to the destabilizing role played by Moscow in the region, recognizing that Russia is not America's main regional adversary, but it can never be a core partner either. To create stability, American policymakers should promote inclusive power-sharing where possible, while remaining open to the possibility that, in some cases, supporting the creation of new states may prove the most stable option.

By championing sustained and sustainable engagement, by investing the resources necessary to confront looming threats before they metastasize, and by working to reverse the region's current slide into chaos, American policymakers today can help limit the damage to U.S. security and prosperity emanating from the Middle East tomorrow.

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