

Containing Iran?: Avoiding a Two-Dimensional Strategy in a Four-Dimensional Region

One of the most significant effects of the Iraq war is Iran's seemingly unprecedented influence and freedom of action in regional affairs, presenting new strategic challenges for the United States and its regional allies. Although Middle Eastern governments and the United States are in general agreement about diagnosing Tehran's activism as the war's most alarming consequence, they disagree on how to respond. The conventional U.S. view suggests that a new Arab consensus has been prompted to neutralize and counter Tehran's rising influence across the region in Gaza, the Gulf, Iraq, and Lebanon. Parallels to Cold War containment are clear. Indeed, whether consciously or unwittingly, U.S. policy has been replicating features of the Cold War model by trying to build a "moderate" Sunni Arab front to bolster U.S. efforts to counter Iranian influence. Despite signals that the Obama administration intends to expand U.S. engagement with Iran, the foundations of containment are deeply rooted and engender bipartisan backing from Congress. Even if the Obama administration desires to shift U.S. policy toward Iran, containment policies will be difficult to overturn quickly; if engagement with Iran fails, reliance on containment will only increase.¹

The containment strategy seems to be founded on what many U.S. officials and analysts perceive as one of the Iraq war's few silver linings: the removal of

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Arab states are more likely to blend confrontation, conciliation, engagement, and accommodation.

Saddam Hussein as the “eastern flank” of the Arab world laid bare Iran’s long-standing malevolence toward the region and spurred Arab states toward greater activism in line with U.S. strategy. Yet, this premise is dangerously flawed. It is the result of misreading local politics and the nuanced ways Arab states are managing and, in some cases, exploiting the challenge from Iran and the broader effects of the Iraq war. Our fieldwork over the past two years in Egypt, the Gulf,

Jordan, and Lebanon suggests a different picture. Arab states are certainly alarmed about growing Iranian influence in the region, particularly about alleged Iranian activities within their own states. Gulf states with Shi’a populations, particularly Bahrain, feel especially vulnerable to Iranian intervention. Moreover, Iranian support for Hamas during crises such as the Gaza war in 2008–2009 burnishes Iran’s pro-Palestinian credentials among Arab publics and challenges the authority and legitimacy of pro-Western Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan.

This alarm, however, does not translate into unequivocal balancing against Iran or a wholesale embrace of U.S. regional containment policy. Instead, Arab states are more likely to blend confrontational policies toward Tehran with elements of conciliation, engagement, and accommodation, thus hedging against sudden swings in U.S. policy toward Iran while maintaining deeply rooted economic and cultural ties with their neighbor to the east. For some, the threat of U.S. military action against Iran is as worrisome as a potential nuclear threat from Iran itself.² There is also little evidence for broad-based support for a single Arab “balancer” against Iran, despite the best efforts of Saudi Arabia and its assertive new diplomacy. Indeed, for some observers, the consequences of Riyadh’s response to Tehran are cause for greater concern than the Iranian challenge.³ Finally, some Arab leaders have skillfully exploited Washington’s preoccupation with Iran and its wariness of democracy in the region to further entrench their authoritarian rule and defer much-needed internal reforms.

U.S. policy may favor placing a neat, dichotomous Sunni vs. Shiite, moderate vs. radical, or Arab vs. Persian Cold War-style template on the region. For the Arab allies of the United States, however, the game is and has always been more complex and multidimensional (e.g., ruler vs. society, Levant vs. Gulf, Hashemite vs. al Saud, and so on). Parallels to the Cold War are thus flawed, potentially generating policies that not only contradict regional realities but also carry hidden opportunity costs, including strengthening Sunni extremism, al

Qaeda-inspired terrorism, and authoritarian rule in the region. The Obama administration needs a new, post-Iraq paradigm, one that acknowledges local complexities and balances the challenge of Iran with other U.S. priorities.

A Shared Diagnosis of the Iraq War's Aftermath: The Rise of Iran

Regional and U.S. analysts alike believe the rise of Iranian power in the years following the Iraq war is a significant challenge. Indeed, the regional perception of growing Iranian influence and aggressiveness, from its nuclear posturing to a seemingly expanded reach from Iraq to the Levant, is pervasive.⁴ The loss of a Sunni Arab power to counter Iran has had a dramatic psychological effect on the region, even if the notion that Iraq ever served as a serious bulwark to Iran is debatable.⁵ The concurrent rise of a Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government has fostered regional alarm over expanded Iranian power, and many are concerned that the U.S. drawdown from Iraq may only increase Iranian influence in that country.

Numerous studies since the war have examined Iran's enhanced role in Iraq, where most of the key Shi'a power brokers in the evolving Iraqi political system have had long-standing ties to Iran predating the war, although Iraqi nationalism often trumps the sectarian connection to Tehran.⁶ On the military front, Iran's training of militants in Iraq through its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and supplying of lethal improvised explosive device (IED) technology to Iraqi insurgents have been well documented.⁷ Iran's influence and activism have expanded beyond what is arguably its natural sphere of influence in Iraq to the core of the Levant. As a prominent Egyptian analyst put it, "[T]he Iraq war brought Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean."⁸ Echoing this, a former official in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry noted, "Before the Iraq war, the Iranians used to come to us about Palestine. We used to say, 'Who the hell are you to tell us about Palestine?' Now, we have to listen to them. Iran is a major player."⁹

Similarly, King Abdullah II of Jordan voiced his fear over Iranian penetration into the Arab-Israeli conflict in sectarian terms by referring to a growing "Shi'a Crescent" in the region.¹⁰ There is widespread concern in Jordan about the expanded Iranian reach into the Levant, with one former official calling this development a "fiasco" in which "Iran is winning everywhere and the United States is losing."¹¹ Iranian activism is most visible by its sponsorship of militant groups such as Hamas of Palestine and Hizballah of Lebanon and through its development of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, many of which were tested during the summer 2006 war in Lebanon. Iranian links to terrorist organizations are not new, but some regional analysts believe Iran has become bolder and more open in its support of such activity in recent years.

Added to this growing regional activism, Tehran has strong motives and the means to acquire nuclear weapons. Although questions remain about the pace and nature of the Iranian program, there is little doubt that Tehran is actively seeking an indigenous uranium enrichment capability at levels that will, at the very least, allow for the capacity to develop nuclear weapons in the future.¹² Finally, Iran exerts significant regional influence through soft-power projection, such as reconstruction aid, infrastructure development, media, and financial investments, particularly in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.¹³ A corollary to this activism has been an increase in Arab hand-wringing over the relative decline of Arab clout in the region and the failure to answer Iranian power. A Jordanian analyst said, “You have to hand it to them . . . The Iranians had a plan prior to the invasion, whereas the Arabs did not.”¹⁴

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the United States has responded to such regional sentiment through arms packages to regional allies, enhanced economic sanctions and financial pressures against Iran, and a visible attempt to forge a diplomatic coalition of “moderate” partners, the so-called Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)+2, with the two being Egypt and Jordan and Iraq now sometimes added as a third.¹⁵ Indeed, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates highlighted the centrality of Iraq to the containment strategy, telling a GCC gathering in Manama, “Your interests and Iraq’s are aligned . . . in the necessity to limit Iranian influence and meddling nationally and regionally—meddling that has already cost far too many lives.”¹⁶ Such an approach, however, misreads Arab regimes’ motives and interests.

A Conflicting Prognosis: U.S. Objectives and Local Agendas

On the surface, Arab regimes’ anxiety over Iran may suggest a neat alignment with U.S. interests, but more parochial motives may actually be at work. Arab leaders have always played a delicate game of four-dimensional chess, balancing the frequently competing demands of domestic constituents, their peers on the Arab stage, external patrons such as the United States, and non-Arab states such as Iran. Actions or rhetoric in one sphere may be calculated to produce an effect in another. This is particularly the case regarding Iran, where regimes’ responses to Iran may be partly intended to entrench their legitimacy at home, to deflect domestic criticism toward an external threat, and to outmaneuver rivals in the Arab arena.

A key issue is the degree to which Arab leaders may be overestimating the susceptibility of their domestic populations to the mobilizing appeal of Iran’s rejectionism on the Arab–Israeli front and the nuclear issue.¹⁷ It is true that, for a brief period, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran appeared to enjoy Nasser-like status among Arab publics in the wake of Hizballah’s successes

against Israel in 2006. Yet, such acclaim quickly dissipated in light of the escalating sectarian strife in Iraq and the Arab perception of Iran's role in stoking this bloodshed.¹⁸ Even among Shi'a populations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Iran holds little sway as a political model, much less an agent provocateur that can marshal violence on demand.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Arab rulers remain sensitive to the fact that Iran's hyperactivism in the region implicitly exposes to domestic and regional audiences the rulers' own deficiencies, particularly their dependence on U.S. support and their paralysis on Palestine.

The result has been an effort by several Arab regimes, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to paint Iran as an aberration from the rest of the region by highlighting its narrowly sectarian ambitions.²⁰ This has aided Arab regime interests on a number of levels. For example, there is frequent criticism in Saudi Arabia that the Iranian threat and the fear of spillover from Iraq provided a convenient pretext for deferring potentially risky internal reforms. The attendant flurry of press editorials on the Shi'a threat, one observer noted, has left little space for debating political and societal issues. Among smaller Gulf states, there is also criticism that Saudi Arabia is seizing on U.S.–Iranian tensions and the uncertainty of a post-drawdown Iraq to reassert its hold over GCC affairs and to reverse what it sees as an increasing trend of unilateralism by the smaller Gulf states.²¹ Tehran, it is important to note, has seized on this friction by stepping up its diplomatic charm offensive toward the individual Gulf states in the hopes of diluting any Saudi-sponsored front.²²

Elsewhere on the regional stage, meeting the Iranian challenge has become something of a new yardstick for Arab authenticity and credibility, surpassing perhaps even the Arab-Israeli conflict. Critics of the Egyptian regime noted that it was deliberately hyping the Iranian threat to make Cairo more relevant to the Gulf states. According to an Egyptian analyst, "We will lose our leverage with Washington if we can't prove our clout on Arab affairs."²³ Much of Egypt's activism on Iran may be calculated to counterbalance Saudi Arabia. Egyptian commentators have warned that Riyadh's new diplomacy against Tehran is "pulling the rug from under Cairo's feet."²⁴ "The Saudis are everywhere with initiatives," an Egyptian official remarked, "and this worries us."²⁵

Due to this inter-Arab disarray and the Iranian threat being at times more symbolic than real in the minds of many Arab leaders, Washington has not always been able to strengthen Arab containment policies against Iran. The failure to forge a unified consensus against Tehran has only been exacerbated by

Seeking regional containment could strengthen Sunni extremism, terrorism, and authoritarian rule.

what Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, perceive as conflicting signals and uncertainty in U.S. policies toward Iran.²⁶ With the release of the Iraq Study Group report in 2006 and the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, Riyadh detected a subtle shift in Washington's approach toward Tehran.²⁷ Efforts to shore up the confidence of the Gulf states, such as the Gulf Security Dialogue of 2006 that enhanced security cooperation between the United States and the GCC as well as the accompanying weapons sales to Gulf states,²⁸ were effectively overtaken by the perception of an imminent U.S.–Iranian détente on Iraq and the need for the Gulf states to secure a “seat at the table” before any U.S.–Iranian deal marginalized them.

Deliberations about a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the U.S.–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) have only accelerated this trend, as have expectations that the Obama administration is likely to expand engagement with Iran. “With the American withdrawal from Iraq, and the absence of any Arab activism, the region will find itself at the stage of a second defeat, at the hands of Syria and Iran,” warned Tariq al-Humayd, editor of *Asharq Al-Awsat*, an Arabic international newspaper.²⁹ Saudi officials have long accused the United States of “handing” Iraq to Iran but have been surprisingly passive in countering Iranian influence. Saudi interlocutors in early 2007 spoke of having already “written off” Iraq as a sphere of Iranian control since 2006 and have been pursuing a policy of “damage control” ever since. Lebanon and Palestine are seen as more hopeful areas to “roll back” Iranian influence and establish a measure of regional parity with the Islamic republic.³⁰

Recent events, however, may have convinced Saudi Arabia that Iranian influence is not as broad as previously assumed and that the Maliki government is worthy of Saudi efforts to bring it “back to the Arab fold.”³¹ In the context of the drawdown, Riyadh can be expected to pursue a wary engagement with the Maliki government while hedging its bets by supporting a broad range of other actors. The next major litmus test for Baghdad from Riyadh's perspective will be whether the Awakening Councils and Sons of Iraq are integrated into Iraqi political life and that the Iraq's Sunni population is protected.³²

Yet, Israel's incursion into Gaza in December 2008 has intensified intra-Arab divisions over Iran and, perhaps more favorably from Tehran's perspective, exposed divisions in Riyadh's multilateral balancing approach. Saudi-Egyptian coordination on Gaza has faced concerted opposition from Qatar and Syria, which have attacked Cairo for failing to open the Rafah border crossing. Egypt and Saudi Arabia responded by boycotting a January 2009 emergency Arab League summit in Doha that was attended by Ahmadinejad, Bashar al Assad of Syria, and Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal.³³ Although some Arab commentators noted that these divisions had been partially bridged at a subsequent summit in Kuwait just a week

later, Qatar and Syria remained vocally opposed to the revival by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's 2002 peace initiative.³⁴ For its part, Iran has reverted to its time-worn tradition of lambasting Arab regimes for their inaction while highlighting its support to Hamas and Palestinian civilians in Gaza.³⁵ These dynamics reveal that, like its efforts in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia's Levantine initiatives against Iran have been diluted by intra-Arab rivalries. Even though Saudi Arabia has made some progress in mending its relationship with Syria, it is unlikely that it will lead to any weakening of the Damascus–Teheran partnership.

Signals from Iran have both enticed Arab states and added to their uneasiness about U.S. resolve. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated in January 2008 that, under the right circumstances, relations with the United States were possible, although he recently dismissed an overture by President Barack Obama in a video message to the Iranian government and people in March 2009.³⁶ Iran has attempted to improve relations with Gulf states and undermine U.S. influence by playing the trump cards of proximity and permanence. “Iran has told us repeatedly, ‘We are your neighbor. The United States is just a passing visitor,’” a Gulf official remarked.³⁷ At the level of religious discourse, Iranian clerics have worked to dampen sectarian tensions and have built up ties with moderate Sunni Islamists in the Gulf and the Levant.³⁸

If Arab partnership for unequivocal containment is unrealistic, so too is wholehearted cooperation by Iran's neighbors in aiding a U.S.–Iranian rapprochement. The GCC has little interest in helping the United States completely “fix” its Iran problem, having benefited enormously from the decades-old U.S. estrangement with Iran. Even rhetorical signals of improving U.S.–Iranian relations are frequently met with ambivalence, if not criticism, in the press. A commentator in *Asharq Al-Awsat* criticized the offers of dialogue with Iran by then-Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and Obama (D-IL) during the primary campaign, implying a dangerous naïveté about the power of dialogue to temper Tehran's interventionist impulse in the region.³⁹

This opposition suggests that the GCC eschews an “either-or” approach toward Iran. The preferred course of action, especially for Saudi Arabia, can best be described as a sort of managed stasis of confrontation and coexistence, short of war, that enriches Arab regimes with U.S. patronage and relegates domestic problems to the backburner. This raises the important question of the opportunity costs a U.S. balancing strategy has thus far incurred.

Arab leaders have always played a delicate regional game of four-dimensional chess.

The Costs of Balancing: Neglected Priorities and Hidden Dangers

A number of factors may work against the Obama administration making radical shifts in Middle East policy, not least of which are domestic politics inside Iran and the United States. U.S. policymakers should know that continued support for a balancing paradigm carries risks that may ultimately present significant long-term threats to U.S. interests. Namely, the neglect of domestic reform and increased sectarian tensions resulting from an attempted Arab-Iranian Cold War provide a fertile ground for the growth of Sunni extremism and al Qaeda-inspired terrorism.

Sidelining the U.S. democratization and reform agenda is a trade-off that became apparent for many observers after the invasion of Iraq as did Washington's subsequent preoccupation with containment. As noted by the *Daily Star* in the wake of an announced \$20 billion U.S. arms package to Saudi Arabia and Gulf allies, "With [Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice's announcement of the arms deal, it has become apparent that Washington's democracy agenda has become more or less abandoned . . . Instead, the U.S. now seems to favor a policy constructed around a fictitious storyline that portrays the world as a battleground between the forces of moderation and extremism."⁴⁰

Many observers attribute the spiral of violence in Iraq to the United States' mishandling of the Iraqi National Assembly elections in 2005, after which sectarian divisions became sharper.⁴¹ In 2006 a Saudi cleric asserted that "[t]he Iraqi elections were the birth pangs of sectarianism in the region."⁴² Although the success of Iraq's 2009 provincial elections may partially offset this dynamic, much of the perceptual damage to the notion of democratization in the region has already occurred.

The resulting fear of contagion from Iraq, combined with the near state of emergency over Iran, has produced a useful pretext for opponents of reform to batten down the hatches and defer on any risky "domestic experiments."⁴³ Among Saudi reformists and activists, the chill has been palpable.⁴⁴ An oft-quoted phrase attributed to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia has acquired new currency: "Why start fires on the inside when there are fires on the outside?"⁴⁵ Washington's shift in priorities has also been felt. "We stopped hearing from the State Department after 2003," noted one reform activist.⁴⁶ Regional governments have skillfully cultivated a perception of external siege, portraying themselves as "buffers" against Iraq's sectarian furies and mediators over an immature citizenry that is prone to tribal and ethnic loyalties.⁴⁷ "Without the al Khalifa," a regime official in Bahrain noted, "this country would go the way of Lebanon or Iraq."⁴⁸ Across the region, there is a premium on

wahda (unity), *watan* (homeland), and *nitham* (system) as an antidote to *fitna* (strife), *fawda* (chaos), and *ta'ifiyya* (sectarianism).⁴⁹

It is not clear if this temporary coalescence of state power is cause for celebration. There are indeed a number of worrisome trends in the region, many of which predate the Iraq war but were exacerbated by it: the perceived

legitimacy deficit of hereditary rulers, stagnant economies, an illiberal political culture, and draconian judicial systems. Taken together, these internal maladies do not portend the imminent failure of the state, but neither are they favorable to long-term U.S. interests and regional stability. Many were identified after the September 11, 2001, attacks as the wellsprings of radicalization and terrorism, and their persistence today argues for a renewed focus on domestic reform as a pillar of future U.S. security strategy in the region.

A second major risk of the balancing approach is that it worsens sectarian tensions resulting from the Iraq war and could increase extremist violence, particularly among radical Sunni groups with connections to al Qaeda, known as Salafi jihadists. In the eyes of Arab regimes, Iran's principle threat is asymmetric, backing nonstate clients in weak or fractured states. The Arab temptation to balance in-kind has invariably encouraged a dangerous form of sectarian politics, whether or not this is the original intent of policymakers in Riyadh and Tehran, as the local factions frequently fall on either side of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. This is particularly the case in Gaza and Lebanon, areas that analysts in Amman, Cairo, and Riyadh emphasized as the priority arenas for confronting Iran. "Why should we worry about Iran in Iraq," a Jordanian analyst argued, "when the house next door is burning down?"⁵⁰ Another analyst in Lebanon described Saudi Arabia's strategy toward Iran as "contain in Iraq, engage in the Gulf, and rollback in the Levant."⁵¹ Yet, this rollback strategy in Lebanon could strengthen Salafi groups in Sidon and Tripoli, hardening sectarian divisions in that country and destabilizing it further.⁵²

Washington would do well to avoid encouraging, tacitly or otherwise, what one Saudi observer has termed a regional "dirty war" in which each side would back nonstate militant actors in areas inside the Middle East and beyond.⁵³ First, such a proxy war strategy risks blowback and a corrosive effect on state viability in Lebanon and Palestine. A regional tug-of-war in Lebanon has had the effect of politicizing and radicalizing the traditionally quietist Salafis, while driving the Shi'a deeper into the arms of Hizballah, despite reported disenchantment with its provision of services. As one analyst argued, "[T]here is simply no one else to

The Iranian threat has provided a pretext for deferring potentially risky internal reforms.

protect them in the face of Sunni radicalization.”⁵⁴ Second, this strategy will invariably reinforce Iranian paranoia, bolster the “us vs. the world” platform of hard-liners, and encourage an escalatory response from Iran. Ultimately, this proposition is not a winning one for the Sunnis, given the proficiency of Iran’s IRGC Qods Force in waging this sort of shadow war.

Escaping the Cold War Paradigm

The Obama administration should consider developing a new regional security architecture that is less confrontational toward Tehran but that nonetheless continues to support and bolster the deterrent capabilities of regional allies. In terms of relations with Iran, a diplomatic approach should consider moving away from regional containment, with the exception of continued multilateral pressure on the nuclear issue, toward further and much more substantive engagement with Tehran. The Obama administration’s initial efforts to engage Iran in multilateral discussions regarding Afghanistan and its decision to join the multilateral talks on the Iran nuclear file are welcome developments.⁵⁵ The United States could go further, however, and engage in direct, bilateral talks with Iran on a number of areas of common interest, including Iraq and Afghanistan as well as issues such as Salafi extremism, narcotics trafficking, natural disaster relief, refugees, and maritime confidence building.⁵⁶ To make such dialogues possible, the United States should consider removing all restrictions on U.S. official contact with Iranian counterparts. Given the history of animosity between the United States and Iran and the high levels of mistrust on both sides, expanded engagement is likely to prove difficult. Yet in order to properly judge its success or failure, engagement must be approached seriously and comprehensively and include direct contacts between Iranian and U.S. diplomats.

In conjunction with such expanded engagement measures, the United States will need to continue muscular multilateral efforts with European allies and Russia and China through the United Nations to target Iranian nuclear developments. If the Iranian regime does not respond to U.S. gestures with modified rhetoric and policies on the two key areas of concern (uranium-enrichment activities and sponsoring terrorism by non-state actors), the United States will be in a stronger position to garner further international support for more hard-line measures against Tehran.

A new approach to Iran should not occur in a vacuum, but rather should be accompanied by U.S. diplomatic efforts to invest in broader multilateral security initiatives and assurances to U.S. regional allies. Regional initiatives should not be modeled on collective security organizations such as NATO, which was originally designed to counter a specific threat. Instead, they could be modeled

on institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, institutions that facilitate regional cooperation based on common interests and pursue confidence-building measures to improve transparency and avoid unintended conflict.

Areas for regional security cooperation in the Middle East could include counterterrorism, narcotics trafficking, border control, and improved responses to humanitarian or environmental catastrophes. The Iraqi displacement crisis and its implications for the long-term stability of Iraq as well as Jordan and Syria should receive high-level attention and resources from key regional states, particularly wealthy countries in the Gulf, and the United States. Cooperation in the maritime area would also be a useful area of focus for regional cooperation initiatives, such as agreements dealing with regional incidents at sea, particularly given the potential for miscalculation and escalation in critical waterways such as the Straits of Hormuz.⁵⁷ Such areas for regional cooperation are not hypothetical. A number of unofficial, “track two” regional dialogues have been pursuing ideas for regional security cooperation ever since the demise of the official multilateral regional security process of the mid-1990s, the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) working group.⁵⁸ Gulf states have been particularly active in pursuing initiatives for regional security cooperation in recent years and seem especially interested in initiating new efforts largely because of concerns over growing Iranian influence in the region.⁵⁹

Such efforts, however, have not received high-level or sustained U.S. government attention and investment to date. The United States could once again foster regional security cooperation by launching a broad regional conference to address these types of common security challenges, starting with a conference focused on support for Iraqi stability, including the displacement crisis, in the wake of the anticipated U.S. drawdown of forces. This conference should reflect high-level U.S. attention, similar to the Arab-Israeli Madrid conference that then-Secretary of State James Baker actively led and cohosted after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Efforts today such as a conference and the subsequent regional security forums that may stem from it should be inclusive, involving not just key regional states such as Egypt, members of the GCC, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey but also critical international players such as China, the European Union, and Russia.

Moreover, a broader view of regional security should also take into account the internal affairs of our traditional partners, particularly domestic reform

The Obama administration should consider developing a new regional security architecture.

processes and repressive state policies, as well as opportunities to help assist states with growing economic and demographic challenges. Supporting incremental yet meaningful political reform is critical, even if the conventional wisdom in Washington is that democracy in the Middle East can be dangerous. If pursued carefully, reform can advance core U.S. interests in reducing political violence and preventing the destabilization of nations critical to U.S. economic and national security.⁶⁰ The pursuits of democracy and stability are not as mutually exclusive as commonly believed and commonly portrayed by authoritarian regimes seeking to maintain their grip on power.

To mitigate the Iraq war's effects inside key regional states, U.S. policy should focus on ensuring that, in states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, stronger governing regimes do not abuse their newly entrenched power to crack down excessively on domestic opposition. At the same time, the United States should assist other states such as Lebanon and Yemen to take measures to prevent weakening state conditions that could evolve into failed states, with all the accompanying problems such as shelter for extremists, magnified proliferation

Altering U.S. strategy to focus on people, not states, is fundamental to address today's Middle East.

risks, and greater potential for massive human rights abuses, to name a few. This suggests that U.S. policy should recognize the long-term security implications of continued repression and avoid putting regional reform on the back burner, even if the focus shifts from holding elections to strengthening democratic institutions and practices. In fractured states, the United States needs to strengthen state institutions while promoting the growth of nonsectarian civil society and a

principled opposition that operates within a democratic framework, aspirations difficult to achieve in a Cold War-like atmosphere of external meddling. Although the U.S. ability to influence what are largely indigenous processes is limited, U.S. attention to reform measures and sustained U.S. pressure can serve as a critical impetus for continued efforts among key allies. Ultimately, sustained and genuine reform processes will strengthen, not weaken, key allies such as Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan.

Serious U.S. investments in regional development and humanitarian assistance can also change the perception that the United States supports regimes, not people. In fact, such an alteration in strategy from states to people is fundamental to the U.S. paradigm shift required to address the realities of today's Middle East. To date, U.S. aid to the region has been narrowly applied, focused on only a handful of countries, and heavily oriented to military assistance. Greater and broader U.S. investment could help improve the U.S. image and

influence in the region, undercut extremism, and maintain the long-term stability of U.S. allies. Several challenges facing the region (e.g., the youth bulge, refugee crisis, and food shortages) provide opportunities to leverage U.S. diplomacy better.

Finally, a new U.S. approach to regional security cannot ignore the Arab-Israeli conflict, even if efforts must be carefully and realistically targeted to what is achievable. For instance, on the Arab-Israeli track, U.S. efforts may first need to concentrate on creating the preconditions necessary to make an Israeli-Palestinian peace process succeed, such as a functioning Palestinian government and Israeli leadership capable and willing to negotiate on core final-status issues. The United States might also support and pursue other Arab-Israeli openings, such as recent movement on the Israeli-Syrian track, which may have more immediate potential for a final settlement. To be sure, resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict will not solve all the outstanding challenges to U.S. interests in the region and is no substitute for a modified U.S. approach to Iran, but there are good reasons to believe that progress on the Arab-Israeli front would significantly undercut extremism and bolster the stability of regional allies.

Moving the U.S. approach to regional security in these directions and away from the Cold War containment template will not guarantee success, but it can improve the U.S. ability to capitalize on opportunities and better contain the spillover of the Iraq episode in ways that are more favorable to long-term U.S. interests. Conversely, the continuation of a bloc-like balancing approach and the neglect of internal reform and social issues are not likely to break the cycle of violence and instability that is so familiar to this region. The Obama administration has an opportunity to change course but this opportunity will be lost if policymakers continue to view this complex region in two-dimensional terms.

Notes

1. See Doyle McManus, "Obama's Iran Strategy," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-oe-mcmanus22-2009feb22,0,118591.column>; Jay Solomon, "U.S.-Arab Alliance Aims to Deter Terrorism, Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2007, p. A6; Bernard Gwertzman, "Sick: Alliance Against Iran," Council on Foreign Relations, January 23, 2007, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/12477/> (interview with Gary G. Sick).
2. See Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival* 49, no. 2 (June 2007): 111-128.
3. For more on Saudi-Iranian relations since the 2003 invasion, see Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).

4. See 'Abd al Rahman al Rashid, "Li Hathahi al-Asbab, Nukasha Iran" [For These Reasons, We Fear Iran], *Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 18, 2006, <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=358858&issueno=10003> (in Arabic); Frederic Wehrey et al., *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).
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