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Trump's Dangerous Obsession With Iran
Why Hostility Is Counterproductive
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The Trump administration has no coherent Iran policy. In May, U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the Iran nuclear deal—even though Iran was not in violation of it. Other than Trump's uninformed and empty assertion that it was “the worst deal ever,” his pretext for the withdrawal was Iranian aggression in the region, which was not linked to the deal. In both his rhetoric and policy, Trump seems to be positioning the United States to enter into armed conflict with Iran, warning Iran in July that it could face “consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before.”

Trump apparently wishes not merely to contain Iran's power but to roll back its regional presence, confining its influence to its borders, disarming it, and, by implication, changing its regime, given that these are constraints that Iran's government could not tolerate for profound strategic and ideological reasons. Doing so would take a massive effort and likely entail another American war in the Middle East—one that the president is not committed to fighting and would not have the popular support to pursue. Rather than a coherent strategy, Trump's aggressive behavior reflects a strange and unhealthy obsession with Iran unwarranted by the actual threat it poses to the interests of the United States and its allies.

The risk now is that the United States could drift into a war with Iran in a fog of bombastic threats and jolting policy reversals even if there were no underlying interest in hostilities. But although Trump's rhetoric is dangerous, his administration's inordinate antagonism is rooted in a deeper

inability, going all the way back to 1979, of the United States to find a way forward with Iran. It is time for Washington to do so before it is too late.

STRATEGIC ILLOGIC

The United States' treatment of Iran as a serious strategic competitor is deeply illogical. Iran imperils no core U.S. interests. It refrains from attacking U.S. forces or using terrorism to target U.S. assets or territory, coexists with the United States in Iraq with little friction, and has agreed to limits on its nuclear program. Tehran scarcely reacts to Israeli strikes on its assets in Syria, where it maintains only a small forward-deployed force supplemented by ragtag Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian Shiite militias. Iran is economically beleaguered and militarily weak, and its navy is a coastal defense force, capable of disrupting shipping but not of seriously challenging the U.S. Fifth Fleet or the battle groups in the Pacific theater it can call upon in a crisis. According to independent, informed assessments, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance, Iranian forces are plagued by outdated equipment, an inadequate defense-industrial base, and a large conscript army that is substantially undeployable on a large scale. Its air force flies planes incorporating 1960s technology, and it has virtually no amphibious capability.

Iran's annual defense spending, about \$16 billion, or 3.7 percent of GDP, on both measures falls considerably short of Israel's, Saudi Arabia's, or the UAE's individually, and is positively dwarfed by their collective spending. Moreover, the United States' military capabilities overwhelm those of Iran on every conceivable measure. Although those capabilities are intended to support the United States' global interests, given U.S. forces' astounding operational effectiveness, honed in continuous warfare in the Middle East and Central Asia since 2011, any serious Iranian challenge to U.S. regional interests that could not be contained through diplomacy would be easily suppressed, even if it morphed into a long-term, low-intensity conflict marked by persistent Iranian terrorism. But of course that is why diplomacy is such an attractive alternative to the use of force.

Iran does have some high-end military capabilities: it has deployed a 2,000-kilometer range ballistic missile, fields the advanced Russian-made S-300

surface-to-air missile system, and is thought to have substantial cyberwarfare capabilities. But the latter is an asymmetric asset, scarcely a match for its U.S. and Israeli equivalents, and Syria's S-300s have not helped it defend against the Israeli Air Force, which destroyed its nuclear weapons infrastructure in 2007. Iran's ballistic missile program would be a serious threat if it were coupled with mass production of compatible nuclear warheads, but this is a distant concern as long as the JCPOA remains in force. Overall, Iran's ability to project military force in the region is severely limited. Iranian troops in Syria probably peaked at about 4,500, roughly equal to the 4,000 or so that the United States has deployed in the eastern part of the country. In Yemen, Iran's military presence is even smaller. In Iraq, there is a residual Iranian military presence because Iran was a combatant in the war against the Islamic State (ISIS). Even there, however, it has reportedly inserted only around 2,000 troops to complement the Shiite militias that it supports, and these assets seem to be overmatched by the presence of an estimated 5,000 U.S. military personnel.

The Iranian intrigues that so alarm the Trump administration mainly boil down to its influence with the Iraqi government and support for Shiite militias, its ongoing reinforcement of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and its backing of the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Some would also throw in its support for Shiite groups in Bahrain, a vassal state of Saudi Arabia ruled by a Sunni minority. Yet Iran's foreign policy has evolved essentially on the basis of opportunistic realism rather than especially aggressive revisionism, and, as noted, it has a sparse military presence in the region.

Iran, to be sure, is theoretically a problem for the United States in Iraq. But the United States created that problem by overthrowing the Sunni minority government of Saddam Hussein, ushering in a Shiite-dominated Iraq that would inevitably be subject to Iranian influence. Trump must of course deal with Iranian clout in Iraq, but U.S. strategic interests do not demand overriding Washington's short-term need to stabilize the country. Recently, especially in the campaign against ISIS, the United States and Iran have been on the same side, and it appears that the Iraqi government has figured out how to work simultaneously with Washington and Tehran. There are

still areas of clear U.S.–Iranian friction—Iraq, for instance, allows Iranian weapons to cross Iraq into Syria—but these are critical from Washington’s point of view only if Iran’s involvement in Syria poses a major threat to core U.S. interests, which it does not.

Iran’s geopolitical interests in Syria are obvious: Syria’s alliance with the Assad regime affords Iran a political toehold in the Levant and a logistical conduit to Hezbollah, its most important regional proxy—although “proxy” may not be the right word for a Lebanese political party whose coalition constitutes the largest bloc in the Lebanese parliament and is viewed by most Lebanese as a domestic political party with a nationalist agenda. Nonetheless, until the Trump team came in and became geopolitically more interested in Damascus, seemingly with an eye to forging a larger strategic partnership with Russia, the United States had seen fit to largely ignore Syria for decades. The Obama administration had initially hoped that Assad would fall but viewed Iran’s intervention as geopolitically unavoidable and insufficiently damaging to U.S. interests to justify a proxy war, which a U.S. humanitarian intervention against Assad would have entailed. In 2014, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria prompted the United States to shift its focus in Syria from regime change to counterterrorism, and the U.S.-led air campaign that the Obama administration initiated in 2014 resulted in the marginalization of ISIS by the end of 2017—a result consistent with Iranian interests.

Iran’s support for Hezbollah, which amassed thousands of surface-to-surface missiles and rockets over the last 40 years, is a more serious threat—if not to the United States than to its closest Middle Eastern ally, Israel. Both have good reasons to deter Hezbollah from starting a war, and to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence in southwestern Syria that would constitute a second front. Some U.S. officials believe that the most straightforward way to achieve this would be through the installation of a Sunni regime in Syria that would cut off Iran’s access to the Levant. Yet it is not clear that Iran’s aims extend beyond simply securing the Assad regime, in which casesuch drastic measures would be unnecessary. When Israeli officials concede privately that the Iran’s second front is an aspirational matter for Tehran, rather than an

immediate contingency, they have a point. There is little doubt that in Iran's ideal world, Israel would be enveloped by its military forces. But this goal is simply beyond Tehran's reach. Unlike in Lebanon, there is no large Shiite population in Syria; the Syrian regime is anxious to rid itself of the Iranians once it no longer needs them; and there is no limit to the number of sorties the Israeli Air Force can fly through Syrian airspace in search of targets that seem linked to Iran. At the moment, the relevant parties appear to be cooperating to containing Iranian basing ambitions in Syria. As Assad has regained control of the country with Iran and Russia's help, Israel has seen the advantages of Assad's continued rule and made arrangements for discreet military coordination with Syria and Russia, which have allowed it to target Iranian and Hezbollah assets in Syria with practical impunity. In other words, Israel has established both a *modus vivendi* with Syria and a deterrent vis-à-vis Iran, and there is no immediate need for U.S. intervention.

In Yemen, too, the Iranian threat is overstated. The Saudi and Emirati intervention in Yemen's civil war started essentially as a war of choice for confronting Iran—consolation for their inability to thwart Assad in Syria. Iran's supplying weapons to the rebel Houthis by sea was the key irritant. Like the Iranians, the Houthis are Shiites, and despite doctrinal differences there is a strong convergence of interest between the two groups. For Tehran, Yemen's Houthi rebels are a useful proxy, while for the Houthis Iran is a source of relatively advanced weapons. But, as a practical matter, it is unclear how decisive Iran's contribution has been to the Houthis' military gains. Houthi attacks beyond Yemen's borders—and probably Iranian weapons shipments—have only increased as the U.S.-backed Saudi-UAE intervention has gone on. U.S. participation has been qualified, hesitant, and operationally problematic. The conflict has now devolved into a humanitarian catastrophe and a military stalemate, arguably ripe for conflict resolution. There is no strategic justification for intensified U.S. military involvement.

Casting Iran as a major strategic rival simply doesn't make sense in terms of traditional international relations considerations such as threat- and power-balancing. Given the relatively modest threat it poses, why does the United

States act as though Iran were a near-peer competitor warranting aggressive rollback? There isn't a single answer. It's a complex function of Israeli anxiety transmitted to Congress via effective lobbying by prominent pro-Israel organizations; the domestic political edge that a focus on Iran confers on Israel's political leaders; Iran's apparent enthusiasm for stoking Israeli fears through rhetoric easily interpreted as genocidal in intent and by minor but ominous rocket launches from Syria; a newly risk-tolerant Saudi Arabia led by an ambitious young prince, Mohammed bin Salman; a lopsided international system in which the European Union is rudderless, divided, and unable to assert itself in the Middle East; and an uninformed and erratic U.S. president bent on unraveling Obama's foreign policy legacy by aligning himself with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and an increasingly illiberal Israel—all unified by a shared antagonism toward Iran. The danger now is that Trump, like George W. Bush in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, will be seduced by aggressive advisers and influential foreign powers into thinking that he can swiftly and easily remake the regional order of the Middle East.

Indeed, it is possible that senior Trump administration officials—National Security Adviser John Bolton in particular—have suggested that Iran's very weakness makes it an easy mark for American power, such that rollback could be achieved at relatively low cost, burnish Trump's martial credentials, and “make America great again.” That such an assessment echoes the Bush administration principals' erroneous application of the same logic to Iraq fifteen years ago would almost certainly be lost on Trump, just as he has failed to understand that the JCPOA preserves rather than erodes the correlation of forces that so overwhelmingly favors Iran's adversaries.

OLD ENEMIES

There is also a tendency in U.S. foreign policy that predates the Trump administration to look for and confront all possible enemies. As Lawrence Freedman argued in his masterful 2008 book *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, this tendency, born of “difficulty coming to terms with the limits of power,” has been especially pronounced

in the Middle East, where the United States has ended up “beset by enemies on all sides,” leading to overaggressive U.S. policies in the region.

Beyond this propensity, notwithstanding Saudi Arabia’s passive support for al Qaeda prior to 9/11, Iran has been arguably a singularly deep and painful irritant to the United States for forty years. The U.S. government was rudely surprised by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which represented a significant strategic loss as well as an embarrassment. Iran’s subsequent imprisonment of 52 American hostages for 444 days between November 1979 and January 1981 rubbed salt into the wound, ruined Jimmy Carter’s presidency, and energized Ronald Reagan’s. When Reagan intervened in Lebanon’s civil war in an attempt to reestablish U.S. power in the region in 1983, Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, killed 241 U.S. Marines in a suicide truck-bomb attack on their barracks in Beirut. Hezbollah’s murder of U.S. personnel in Saudi Arabia at Khobar Towers in 1996, and a decade later Iran’s provision to Iraqi militias of highly lethal explosively formed projectiles for targeting U.S. forces, did not help.

The Iranian regime, for its part, has found it impossible to surmount its resentment and mistrust over a litany of U.S. transgressions. Iran and Hezbollah have vowed to destroy the Jewish state and provided political and material support for militant Palestinian groups. Iran, especially during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, rhetorically threatened the United States directly. Efforts to mend fences—by Ronald Reagan in the context of the Iran-Contra scandal, Bill Clinton and Muhammad Khatami in 1997 in the tense aftermath of the Khobar attack, and Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani in 2015—have been unavailing. So, if the United States has been generally predisposed to find enemies, it may have been overdetermined that the country it would single out in the Middle East would be Iran, especially after Iraq was gotten out of the way.

No predisposition, of course, justifies outright irrationality. In particular, Saudi and Israeli rhetoric about Iran has instrumentalized distinctly inapposite historical analogies in an effort to encourage Washington to roll back Iran. At a February security conference in Munich, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proclaimed that the Iran nuclear deal had

unleashed “a dangerous Iranian tiger in our region and beyond” and claimed that, although Iran was “not Nazi Germany,” there were some “striking similarities.” Then, in an essay published on July 23 in the Arab News, Prince Khaled bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States, took the comparison even further. He praised Trump for rejecting “the sort of appeasement policies that failed so miserably to halt Nazi Germany’s rise to power” and wrote of the “need to unite on a broader strategy to address the Iranian regime’s destabilizing behavior.” He went on to characterize the nuclear deal as “part of a worrying pattern of appeasement,” and then to throw a bear hug on the Trump administration designed to place the onus of rollback on Washington and discourage anything but a comprehensive response to all aspects of Iranian aggression in the region.

Preposterously, he then cast Iran as presenting a “similar danger” to the Axis powers. The essay’s hyperbole peaked with this exhortation:

As at Munich eight decades ago, when Western concessions failed to satisfy Nazi Germany’s desires for a bigger, more powerful “Reich,” the world again is faced with the twin options of offering treasure and territory to placate a murderous regime, or confronting evil head-on.

The inane comparison between a militarily challenged Iran and the Nazi juggernaut raises questions about the rationality of Saudi Arabia’s motivations, its integrity as a U.S. ally, and, frankly, the quality of the advice that it is getting from whatever Washington-connected consultants Riyadh hired to draft the screed that Prince Khaled bin Salman published under his name. In any case, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are engaged in a propaganda campaign to convince a naive American president that Iran is a singularly pernicious threat, en route to controlling as many as four Middle Eastern capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa. Baghdad is certainly more amenable to Iranian influence than it was under Baathist rule thanks to the U.S. intervention, but Iran lacks the capacity and will to truly control Iraq. The Syrian regime is fiercely nationalistic and sees Iran in utilitarian terms. Tehran’s influence in Beirut represents a status quo of long standing rather than a sudden windfall incurred through some game-

changing maneuver. And the Houthis are unlikely to serve Iran as anything other than a useful tool for poking the Saudis in the eye.

The overt objective of the Israelis, Emiratis, and Saudis is to afford the Iran issue an inordinate distorting effect on U.S. foreign policy, and arguably to incline the Trump administration toward kinetic action that they think would play well with the U.S. voters, or at least Trump's base and his major funders. They are not wrong to believe that the United States historically has been susceptible to grossly exaggerated threats. During the Cold War, U.S. presidents frequently mistook predominantly local or at best national political disputes as part of a concerted Soviet plan for the global expansion of communism; Vietnam is only the most egregious example. But until the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the United States had managed to control its penchant for hyping enemies, building a reputation in the Middle East as an essentially cautious and pragmatic status quo power through a calibrated set of alliances and highly selective military involvement.

Comparably sound alliance management is required now with respect to Iran. The United States certainly has to take Israel and the Gulf Arab states' worries about Iran seriously, and to persuade them that it is doing so. This does not require military action. Indeed, Trump has blanched at increasing U.S. troop levels in Syria, even as the Pentagon has favored slight increases. At the same time, although the Iranians don't threaten the United States directly, they do threaten U.S. allies at least conceptually, so Washington can't just turn a blind eye. But the prudent course is for the United States to ensure that its allies can defend themselves, intervening only when things get out of hand.

At this point, however, things are emphatically not out of hand, notwithstanding the strained efforts of some U.S. allies to convince Trump otherwise. Moreover, it is precisely actions by the United States and its allies that have opened the door to Iran's machinations in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and to an extent Yemen. This perverse dynamic, alongside Iran's inherent weakness and the calibrated nature of its Middle Eastern interventions, should remind American policymakers that Iran will not be a

threat to core U.S. interests unless the United States itself makes it one. Now, as before, rollback is precisely the wrong way to approach Iran.

Eve of Destruction

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When President Trump withdrew the United States last May from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal concluded in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany), and reimposed US economic sanctions in August, the potential consequences for the Middle East were immediately clear. Iran might eventually react by resuming the nuclear enrichment activities that had spurred the signatories to negotiate the deal. That, in turn, could provoke attacks on Iran by the United States, Israel, or both, possibly in coordination with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Asserting that it was merely implementing the will of the international community, the US–Israel–Sunni coalition would attempt to destroy Iran’s nuclear-related infrastructure.

The neutralization of Iran’s air and shore defenses to clear a safe path for the assault would require highly destructive attacks far beyond the sustained air campaign needed to eliminate its dispersed, currently deactivated, nuclear installations: the heavy-water plant at Arak, the uranium hexafluoride storage facility at Natanz, and the deep underground centrifuge cascades within the mountain at Fordow. The targets would also likely include military bases where the United States suspects that nuclear work is being carried out as well as research, development, and testing facilities for ballistic missiles. These would not be pinprick attacks. They could continue for days or even weeks as damage assessments were conducted and further strikes ensured that there was nothing left of the installations but rubble.

Given the vast disparity between US combat power and that of its regional allies and Iran, it is certainly possible that Iran’s leaders would choose not to resist militarily and would instead seek to exploit the attacks as unprovoked aggression to gain European, Russian, and Chinese diplomatic support and perhaps even the reconstitution of its civil nuclear

infrastructure. This would at least avoid a regional war. The United States could be isolated diplomatically, but for the Trump administration that would scarcely constitute punishment. And although Iran would probably move as quickly as possible toward a renewed nuclear capability, the success of the first round of strikes would give the attackers confidence in their ability to eliminate it again.

It is equally possible that Iran would resist militarily despite its inferior capabilities. Its options are ample. There are many American civilians in Iraq, in addition to the 5,200 US military personnel deployed there in support of Iraqi forces, and they would be vulnerable to Iranian retaliation. Indeed, Tehran must already be configuring its assets in Iraq to facilitate a rapid response to a US attack. With the formation of a new government in Baghdad now underway following the Iraqi national elections in May, it has the opportunity to press for the appointment of ministers with strong links to Iran who would be inclined to help it strike US targets in Iraq. Iran is capable of carrying out attacks on American personnel in Afghanistan and Syria as well. It could press Lebanon's Hezbollah to attack targets in Israel, encourage Houthi missile attacks against Saudi Arabia from Yemen, and strike both Saudi Arabia and the UAE with cruise missiles.

Terrorism is also an option: the Iranian-backed attack against the US Air Force housing complex in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, twenty-two years ago took place at a time of similar tensions between the two countries. Congress was debating the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act and had revived the Iran Freedom Support Act after two failed attempts at passage, and the Clinton administration had issued executive orders tightening sanctions on Iran. It was also engaged in a vigorous diplomatic effort to persuade Iran's trading partners to cut commercial links.

Any of these Iranian actions would demand a US or allied military response. Given the tenor of the Trump administration—and the assertive posture of its allies toward Iran—escalation would be inevitable and aimed at some sort of victory. The resulting spiral, if uncontrolled, would culminate in US attacks against Iranian regime targets and “instruments of regime control”—that is, the internal security services that keep the regime

secure and suppress dissent. No one knows exactly how this would play out. If past is prologue, the US would win militarily but find it hard to convert operational victory into a durable political success. In any case, the cost to all the combatants would be high.

War with the Islamic Republic, however, is not the only possible result of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has been neutered politically by his failure to deliver relief from economic sanctions. His successor, when the next presidential election is held in 2021, could be someone to his right, such as Saeed Jalili, a former secretary to Iran's Supreme National Security Council and adamant advocate of nuclear power. If so, the US will have achieved regime change in Iran, just not the kind it was aiming for.

Trump's advisers, however, believe that a combustible mix of Iranian economic decline, widespread contempt for the clerical regime apparent in nationwide protests, and indiscriminate government repression will produce an uprising that sweeps away the forty-year legacy of the Islamic Revolution. In the best case, from the administration's perspective, the disruptive effect of sanctions on a mismanaged economy and plunging currency will suffice to provoke rebellion. The use of military force in response to Iran's resumption of its nuclear program would add to pressure on the regime by demonstrating its vulnerability and encourage popular resistance by signaling the possibility of US support for anti-regime violence. If a new Iranian regime were secular and pro-American, it would be swiftly embraced by the West and integrated into a peaceful regional order. This is a stirring vision. But the logic behind it implicitly equates a tough regime backed by the Revolutionary Guard Corps with that of the Shah, whose will to power crumbled in the face of enormous demonstrations and whose military deserted him in the crisis.

Other consequences could include difficulty in negotiating future arms control or nonproliferation agreements, as a result of Trump's dismissal of the JCPOA as a "political agreement" binding only on the administration that signed it; the weakening of the transatlantic alliance against the backdrop of a resurgent Russia; the risk of regional nuclear proliferation

should Iran, unconstrained by the JCPOA, sprint for a bomb; the strengthening of China and Russia; and the erosion of the dollar as a reserve currency as a result of secondary sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on firms that violate US sanctions on Iran.

Before the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, the transatlantic alliance was fraying but still viable. This diagnosis is now subject to change. Walking away from the agreement was a grave affront to the European governments that had worked hard to negotiate it. For the British, French, and Germans, the JCPOA transcended a mere technical arrangement regulating Iran's nuclear program. It was a symbol of a new European ability and determination to alter the course of international developments in a way that served a serious, shared interest. Even though the pact was primarily between the United States and Iran, Europeans spoke of the JCPOA with pride, in part because it was such an unlikely achievement given the mistrust among the parties, the staggering complexity of the diplomatic coordination involved in establishing a P5+1 position, the intricacy of the technical issues, and the high bar the P5+1 set for an acceptable outcome. For Germany, participation confirmed its status as a European power with global interests.

Thus American rejection of the JCPOA was not simply a matter of discarding an agreement with Iran; it was a repudiation of a European effort to realize its ambitions, demonstrate competence, and embrace a coherent identity just as powerfully entropic forces were jeopardizing these goals. The far right is ascendant in Italy, Greece, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. The United Kingdom's planned withdrawal from the European Union has weakened the political center. Right-wing parties in Europe are better organized and more adroit at neutralizing the center-left as well as the center-right than their counterparts in the United States, which has devoured the center-right while invigorating the left.

As the political scientist Ivan Krastev shows in *After Europe* (2017), the principal attribute of contemporary right-wing governments in Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Austria is that they ground their legitimacy in opposition

to Brussels. They have two mobilizing issues with which to bludgeon their liberal opponents: austerity and immigration. Germany, under Angela Merkel, is paralyzed by its deep commitment to austerity and openness to refugees.¹ Inspired by the British Conservative Party's obliteration of the Independence Party, her center-right base sees its best option for undermining the far-right Alternative für Deutschland as appropriating its anti-immigration platform. French President Emmanuel Macron is in a more secure position, which is why he has been so outspoken in methodically pursuing a UK-French-German initiative to sustain the JCPOA in the face of American animus. He is unlikely to have any better luck in London than in Berlin, however, given the UK's astonishing political disarray and its incapacity to orchestrate any meaningful diplomatic initiatives, including its exit from the EU.

All three countries face yet another stumbling block in the form of Trump's support for the Continent's surging right. The US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, a former Fox News commentator, prompted German politicians' calls for his expulsion by declaring, "I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe, other leaders. I think there is a groundswell of conservative policies that are taking hold because of the failed policies of the left," and cheerleading for Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, a fierce critic of Merkel's immigration policy, as a "rock star." (In a tweet after Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Grenell also said that German firms should wind down their business in Iran immediately.)

In the meantime, the Trump administration is encouraging the European right through its surrogate Steve Bannon. In France, onstage with National Rally president Marine Le Pen in March, he exhorted his audience to "let them call you racist, xenophobes, nativists, homophobes, misogynists—wear it as a badge of honor!" In Prague, he declared the postwar international order to be a "fetish." In Hungary, he praised Viktor Orbán. And then there is the American president himself, who disparaged NATO as playing the US for "schmucks" and the EU as "brutal" to the US, made a mockery of the G-7 summit, slapped EU states with tariffs on steel, aluminum, and an array of lesser imports, withdrew from the Paris Climate

Accord, and has embraced Russia as a de facto ally even though it overtly threatens European security. The Trump administration is clearly trying to drive a wedge between France, Germany, and the UK, on the one hand, and the rest of Europe on the other. The effort is paying off. Jeremy Shapiro, research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations, notes that the Poles and Italians regard Trump as their shield against Berlin and Brussels. This perception is likely to spread.

In this already toxic situation, it's difficult to say how much transatlanticism will suffer as a result of US withdrawal from the JCPOA. But it could get worse. If the EU follows through on its current commitment to the JCPOA in the hope of keeping Iran corralled, it will eventually have to grapple with the imposition of secondary US sanctions on European firms dealing with Iran. Total, Airbus, and Fiat, for example, have major deals with Iran that were signed upon the suspension of economic sanctions under the JCPOA. The EU can retaliate against these secondary sanctions by sanctioning US firms operating in Europe. But Brussels cannot effectively indemnify European firms that do business in dollars or in the United States.

This subjugation will be difficult for the EU to endure. French finance minister Bruno Le Maire, referring to the US as the “world’s economic policeman,” asked, “Do we want to be vassals who obey decisions taken by the United States while clinging to the hem of their trousers? Or do we want to say we have our economic interests, we consider we will continue to do trade with Iran?” His preferred answers are, of course, No and Yes. But the questions are probably moot, given the pressures the US can bring to bear. In all likelihood, European business interests in the United States will ultimately outweigh countervailing interests in Iran, and the JCPOA will collapse.

The effect of US withdrawal from the JCPOA on future arms control and nonproliferation agreements is tricky to predict. It would be fair to assume that renegeing on the deal is unlikely to enhance the United States’ reputation for integrity. In the near term, the North Koreans do not seem to have focused on the US withdrawal from the JCPOA at all. Yet when

National Security Adviser John Bolton pointed to the “Libya model” as the organizing principle for the US approach to denuclearization talks with North Korea, the response was swift and censorious. Whatever Bolton thought he was referring to, Kim Jong-un saw Muammar Qaddafi tortured to death in a drain ditch. Clearly, the US has won a reputation for pursuing regime change at the point of a bayonet.

From a North Korean perspective, though, Washington already had a reputation for walking away from deals. George W. Bush unilaterally abandoned the 1994 Agreed Framework negotiated by the Clinton administration, dashing North Korean confidence in America’s reliability. That agreement had frozen North Korea’s operation and construction of reactors that the US had concluded were components of a secret nuclear weapons program. In return, the North Koreans were to get two reactors whose fuel would be difficult to reprocess into weapons-grade nuclear material and, until these were up and running, fuel oil to sustain their economy. Experts estimate that in the absence of the Agreed Framework North Korea would have had hundreds of nuclear bombs by now, not the thirty to sixty it has fabricated since Bush abandoned the agreement.

When the Bush administration took office and set up its Korea policy review, however, it learned that North Korea was covertly experimenting with uranium enrichment. It could have demanded a halt to enrichment activity while keeping the constraints of the Agreed Framework in place. But for Bolton, then a high-ranking figure in the Bush State Department, the choice was clear: “This was the hammer I had been looking for,” he later wrote, “to shatter the Agreed Framework.”² His candor would undoubtedly have made an impression in Pyongyang. While withdrawal from the JCPOA has no doubt registered, the fate of the Agreed Framework and, more recently, White House talk about Libya probably weigh more heavily in North Korean calculations regarding Trump’s trustworthiness.

Assessing the broader and longer-term effect of withdrawal from the JCPOA is hard because diplomatic arms control and nonproliferation efforts have been enervated for decades. Since the mid-1990s new

agreements, let alone treaties, have been increasingly elusive. The Senate, for example, refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996), and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (known as New START) was ratified in 2010 only because its ambitions were so limited. It would clearly not have countenanced the JCPOA in treaty form. This record suggests that Trump, having promised a treaty to North Korea, may have inadvertently set up his initiative for failure. The sour congressional reaction to the Singapore Joint Statement could hardly be called encouraging. The Senate seems no more likely to approve a treaty with North Korea than with Iran or Russia. Trump himself, in withdrawing from the JCPOA, has demonstrated the worthlessness of the only alternative—an executive agreement.

China, the most obvious partner for a future arms control agreement, has set two preconditions that will never be met by the US or Russia. The first is that the size of China's nuclear weapons stockpile should constitute the approximate ceiling for Russian and US inventories. China has only about 260 weapons, while the US has 6,800 and Russia 7,000, and neither would agree to such a huge reduction. China's other precondition is that India be included in any agreement, but New Delhi would insist that Islamabad be included as well. So whatever effect the JCPOA withdrawal has had on Beijing's strategic calculations won't be reflected in an arms control agreement. Russia is not a candidate either, given Vladimir Putin's renewed emphasis on nuclear weapons in Russia's overall military strategy and insistence on limits to ballistic missile defenses and "Prompt Global Strike," the US plan for conventionally armed ICBMs, which Washington has rejected. US claims that Russia is cheating on its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty also appear to be an insuperable obstacle to ratification of a new START treaty.

Other potential proliferators, such as Syria, Libya, or Iraq, have been either crushed or disarmed, so there is little prospect that broader perceptions of US perfidy in the Iranian case will matter very much in future arms control negotiations with them. The most likely potential proliferators—Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Japan, and South Korea—are more or less in the US camp. The Trump administration does not appear to be focused on limiting the

capabilities of its allies, or for that matter forestalling their desire for nonconventional weapons by promising the protection of the US nuclear deterrent.

This rather bland appraisal of the effect of withdrawal from the JCPOA on future arms control agreements, however, should not be reassuring. If Trump's decision does lead to the pact's collapse, it will have seriously damaged the credibility of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) just before the next Review Conference in 2020. The Iran nuclear deal was ultimately grounded in Iran's adherence to the NPT and included an Additional Protocol that required Iran to submit to unusually intrusive inspections, as well as in the authority of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which conducts the monitoring. The negotiation of the JCPOA clearly reaffirmed both Iran's NPT commitments and the legitimacy of IAEA inspections. By contrast, the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA has subverted the NPT, leaving force the default option.

A nuclear-armed Iran was long thought to be the catalyst for proliferation on the Arab side of the Gulf. Experts have questioned this conventional wisdom for several reasons.³ A nuclear fuel cycle is extremely difficult to engineer, build, and maintain. Fabricating a weapon with the enriched uranium or plutonium produced by the fuel cycle is yet another immense challenge. And having weaponized the fuel, there remains the task of reducing the size of the "physics package" to fit on a missile and harden it enough to survive reentry into the atmosphere. For the handful of states that have succeeded in creating a stockpile of deliverable nuclear weapons, the effort has been sustained, intensive, immensely expensive, and generally reliant on outside help. On the Arabian Peninsula the money is ample, but the expertise and technological infrastructure are not. Ironically, the decision to go for a bomb would be complicated by the multilateral measures put in place over the last decade to hinder Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, the A.Q. Khan network that aided regional nuclear efforts has been shut down, while North Korean assistance would presumably be curtailed as long as negotiations with the United States were going on.

Although the Saudis have contended that nuclear power is economically essential and have negotiated with a range of suppliers, they have moved slowly until now. Under a new leader, this could change. In an attempt to transform the kingdom, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has proceeded aggressively, especially in security matters. Under his command, Saudi forces are engaged in Yemen and the kingdom has put itself forward as a bulwark against Iran. In March, he said, “Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible.”⁴ That the Saudis have wanted to preserve the nuclear weapons option is evident from their unwillingness to agree to a US prohibition on enrichment as a condition for the transfer of American nuclear technology. The crown prince’s declaration does not magically erase the obstacles to a nuclear weapons capability. But his resources, determination, and pattern of risk-taking behavior could propel Saudi Arabia toward a nuclear capability faster than expected. It is not certain that the Trump administration would object.

Finally, unilateral American sanctions on Iran could produce an economic boomerang effect. Successive US administrations have relied on sanctions in the absence of other coercive alternatives to the use of force. In most cases, they are counterproductive. They strengthen authoritarian regimes and punish ordinary people. But they satisfy the need to be seen to be doing something to defend US interests where the will to fight for them is tenuous or the stakes are not that high. Under some conditions they can also be effective, as they were against Iran in the years preceding Tehran’s agreement to negotiate stringent limits on its nuclear program. The sanctions were especially punitive because they were multilateral, and Iran had no way to evade them. Domestic political circumstances made sanctions relief essential, the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani as president provided an opening, and the Obama administration was prepared to deal.

But Trump also intends to levy sanctions against countries that violate US unilateral sanctions against Iran. These measures could be extremely effective since international transactions are largely denominated in dollars. Trump has been clear that the US will enforce sanctions on any country

that, for example, buys Iranian oil by seizing its US-based assets and barring it from doing business in the US.

This will probably work in the short term. Over the long term, nations will develop countermeasures. Most obviously, they will shift incrementally and slowly toward other currencies for trading purposes, probably the euro or the renminbi. The Chinese are already establishing companies whose only trading partner is Iran. The Germans are thinking of doing the same.⁵ Dollars would not be a factor in these arrangements nor would there be US-based assets for Washington to hold hostage. Other countries would have an incentive to follow suit.

As China becomes the champion of free trade and the US bows out of multilateral trade pacts, while using its power over transactions in dollars as a weapon against Iran's trading partners, including US treaty allies, the advantages of the dollar as a reserve currency will slowly shrink. This is not necessarily a bad thing from a purely economic perspective, and to some extent international reliance on the dollar has been declining already, albeit in small steps. From a foreign policy perspective, however, the emergence of rival currencies chips away at American influence. It's worth recalling that British sterling was a reserve currency for a century and then, rather suddenly, it was not.

The postwar liberal order had many elements: cultural, economic, strategic. US leadership inspired and energized these elements. In some situations, American involvement was disastrous, as it was for millions of Vietnamese. For Eastern Europeans dominated by the Soviet Union, the postwar order was not liberal at all, a dispensation in which the US declined to intervene because of forbidding strategic circumstances. Yet over the course of decades and a vast geographic area, the liberal order fostered by the US elevated billions from extreme poverty and created a model for broad political participation and freedom of expression.

Alliances led by the US proved durable because its allies did not fear it. And this encouraged the adoption of trading and security systems based on negotiated rules that the US, despite its hegemonic status, played by more

often than not. Until now, every US administration since Franklin Roosevelt's had attempted, some more adroitly than others, to reinforce this liberal order. A global loss of belief and confidence in that order has been growing since the end of the cold war. Yet the American withdrawal from the JCPOA is so striking because it reflects not just the abandonment of this order but its systematic annihilation, and with it the end of US international leadership and the relative stability that it secured.

—August 29, 2018

1

For more on Germany's inability to confront Trump, see Jonathan Hackenbroich, "After the JCPOA, The World Needs Germany. But Where Is It?" at ecfr.eu, May 30, 2018. ↩

2

John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (Threshold, 2007), p. 106. ↩

3

See Robert Einhorn and Richard Nephew, "The Iran Nuclear Deal: Prelude to Proliferation in the Middle East?," *Foreign Policy at Brookings, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Series*, Paper 11, 2016, pp. 27–46. ↩

4

Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Crown Prince Likens Iran's Supreme Leader to Hitler," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2018. ↩

5

Heiko Maas, "Making Plans for a New World Order," *Handelsblatt*, August 22, 2018. ↩

Powder Keg in Syria
Steven Simon
New York Review of Books
MAY 24, 2018

The air strike carried out against Syria on April 13 by the United States, Britain, and France—“Operation Desert Stormy” in Bill Maher’s memorable phrase—was carefully pegged to the alleged responsibility of the Assad regime for the chemical attack in Douma on April 7, which killed more than forty people and violated the Chemical Weapons Convention. The strike was explicitly presented as a matter of deterrence, not regime change, and the targets—the Barzah Research and Development Center in the Damascus suburbs and the Him Shinshar chemical weapons complex near Homs—bore this out. No presidential palaces were struck, although the countries responsible for the strike were clearly willing to hit Damascus itself. The regime has kept its nerve throughout the civil war, even when the opposition wiped out almost the entire Syrian war cabinet in 2012 with a cleverly placed bomb, and when in the spring of 2015 Palmyra and Jisr al-Shughour fell to rebels who were simultaneously laying siege to western Aleppo. It is scarcely likely to be intimidated by a single strike on this scale. This does not mean that the Trump administration won’t eventually launch another, but for the moment, the status quo will probably prevail.

Under the cover of the raid and the rhetoric that preceded it—Trump labeled Assad a “Gas Killing Animal” who enjoyed murdering his own people—the Israelis were advancing their own objectives in Syria. Two days after the atrocity in Douma, the Israeli air force hit a Syrian air base near Homs, killing at least seven Iranian military advisers. Tehran took notice. “Iran is not Syria,” said Ali Shirazi, a Revolutionary Guard Corps official. “If Israel wants to survive for several more days, it needs to stop this children’s play. Iran has the ability to obliterate Israel and when prompted to, [it will be moved] to turn Tel Aviv and Haifa into dust.” Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior aide to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, warned that “Israel’s crime will not remain unanswered.”

Since Donald Trump took office, Israel, the United States, and Iran have been lurching toward war. In Jerusalem and Washington, fear and frustration have been accumulating since 2015, when the Iran nuclear deal was concluded. Because it did not result in the permanent elimination of Iran's nuclear capability, its critics in the US and Israel rejected it as at best irrelevant. At worst it was seen as abetting Iranian tyranny and aggression (by giving Iran legitimacy as a diplomatic partner) and funding its imperial designs (by suspending sanctions). Having lost the fight against the deal, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their advocates in Washington turned their attention back to Iran's conventional threat to the region. Iran, they argued, exercised undue influence in Lebanon, supported Shia rebels in Yemen, subverted Sunni rule over the Shiite majority in Bahrain, supported Shia militias in Iraq, and kept the Assad regime on life support as a host for its parasitic effort to encircle Israel.

The Trump administration has linked these security concerns with those that directly bear on Iran's nuclear program. Iran might be in compliance with the letter of the nuclear agreement, Trump has suggested, but its regional activities demonstrate noncompliance with its spirit—hence Trump's reluctance to certify Iran's fulfillment of its part of the agreement. The administration proposed cutting off Iran's access to Syria using US forces based there, withdrawing from the nuclear deal, reimposing sanctions on Iran, and pushing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran's expeditionary force, out of the Middle East. This new approach was greeted ecstatically in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Jerusalem as the triumphant return of the United States to the region after eight years of pathetic restraint. It has also helped reignite the periodically hot cold war between Israel and Iran that began not long after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and has lasted ever since.

Tensions between those two countries spiked on February 10, 2018, when an Iranian-made unmanned aerial vehicle, launched from a Syrian air base near Palmyra, crossed into Israeli airspace. The drone was a copy of a US RQ-170 Sentinel that Iran had captured when US controllers in Afghanistan inadvertently let it enter Iranian airspace in 2011. According to Israel, the drone was armed. Although the Syrian government did not

comment publicly, one well-connected official privately explained to me that the drone launch was intended to warn Israel that it could no longer treat Syria, which the Israeli air force has struck at least one hundred times since 2011, as a free-fire zone. But Israeli intelligence officials intercepted communications conducted in Farsi by the launch crew, which indicated that Iran was involved. The Israelis believe that the launch crew commander was killed in a subsequent air strike.

It is possible that the launch crew was Iranian and that Syrians were giving the orders, but most explanations have tended to put the blame on Iran, whose Foreign Ministry derided the idea of an Iranian drone flying into Israel as “ridiculous.” US and Israeli analysts in the meantime are trying to figure out why Iran would take such a provocative action now. The risk of escalation would seem to outweigh the benefit of testing Israel’s capability to detect drones or its response to such intrusions. Some have wondered whether the launch is a sign that Iran lacks full control over its forces in Syria. In any case, the launch seems to have been tacitly sanctioned by Russia, because it is unlikely that the Russians would have had no advance knowledge of it.

The Israelis anticipated the drone and shot it down with a missile from an AH-64 Apache helicopter gunship approximately ninety seconds after it crossed into Israeli airspace in the southeastern tip of the Galilee, not far from the junction of the Israeli, Jordanian, and Syrian borders. The Israeli air force then struck the air base from which the drone had been launched and, it claims, destroyed Syria’s main command-and-control bunker and rendered half of Syria’s air defense infrastructure unusable. Iranian installations were also targeted. Israel lost an F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft to a Syrian anti-aircraft missile over Israeli airspace. The loss, the first of an Israeli aircraft to enemy fire in thirty-eight years, appears to have been due to pilot error: the crew evidently failed to take defensive measures, perhaps because it was too confident.

Israel and Iran both seemed to recognize that the situation was at risk of escalating dangerously. They are said to have communicated their

respective intentions to stand down through Russia, which has strong links to both Tehran and Jerusalem and an interest in controlling escalation within Syria. But there are no clearly defined and mutually acknowledged red lines in this conflict, and the two countries could clash directly again. This was clearly on the mind of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who insisted that Israel would not just strike Iran's facilities in Syria but was prepared to take the fight to Iran itself. This was an extraordinary claim, which the clerical regime might not take seriously. But Israel does have the capacity to strike Iranian targets with missiles from submarines patrolling Iran's coast, long-range aircraft refueled over open ocean or in the airspace of Iran's Arab adversaries in the Gulf, and even special forces that have been trained to carry out operations inside Iran.

Netanyahu's warning suggests that he believes Iran intends to establish permanent military bases in Syria, which would constitute a second front against Israel, along with Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon. For Israel, which is already threatened by as many as 150,000 rockets from Hezbollah, a second armed adversary, on its border with Syria, would be intolerable. The last time a Hezbollah–IRGC unit carried out a reconnaissance operation along the border, in January 2015, Israel wiped it out in an air strike that killed a Revolutionary Guard general and the son of Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's best-known operative. Israel's current strategy seems to be to walk a fine line between deterrence and provocation. This is difficult to do.

It is hard to say just how likely Iran is to establish a second front in Syria. Autonomous Iranian bases would be relatively easy for Israel to target and difficult for Iran to defend. In light of these risks, Iran might opt instead to negotiate access to Syrian bases once the civil war ends, much as the US maintains access to bases in Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait (the latter six countries are part of the Gulf Cooperation Council). But if the experience of the US is any indication, this sort of situation may not be ideal for Iran. The terms under which the US can use local bases were established by agreements that took decades to negotiate—they began in 1951 in Saudi Arabia and in 1979 in Oman—and involved delicate compromises. The host countries wanted a guarantee of

security, which Congress was reluctant to confer; American planners, meanwhile, needed the kind of unimpeded access that could complicate the host government's domestic politics.

The resulting agreements gave the US restricted access—for example, the US cannot simply attack other countries from these bases without the explicit permission of the host—and there is no reason to expect that Iran's access to Syrian facilities would be any more permissive. The Syrian regime is fiercely nationalistic; it would likely view a permanent Iranian presence in the country both as an affront to its sovereignty and as a cause of trouble with Israel and the United States. The regime will certainly continue to welcome the Iranians and their proxies as long as they are useful. After that, one suspects the welcome will expire.

At the moment, Iran's presence in southwestern Syria remains relatively small: a few hundred advisers and technical personnel, and as many as five thousand Shia fighters drawn from Syrian villages, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the mainstream media, those statistics have been absurdly exaggerated. The New York Times, quoting Washington-based pressure groups largely funded by Persian Gulf governments, reported that the number of proxy fighters was "as many as 20,000." The report was illustrated by a map of western Syria speckled with red squares indicating specific locations where Iranians or their proxies were based—"headquarters, logistical nodes, drone control rooms, training centers." But none of these entities was defined: a "headquarters" could be a half-dozen fighters with a radio, a logistical node could be in a parking lot, a drone control room in a trailer, or a training center consist of a ramshackle rifle range and a port-a-potty. The illustrations accompanying the story showed only four Syrian air bases, which were identified as Iranian. This would come as a surprise to the Syrian regime.

The Syrian government concedes that there are five to six thousand of these Shia fighters inside its borders, but contends that it needs them because they augment regular Syrian forces during especially demanding operations. They are currently in the southwest, but the regime says that they will eventually be moved eastward to join the fight to secure Deir ez-

Zour, near the Iraqi border. This claim is at least plausible; it reflects the way the regime has thus far distributed its available forces.

Israeli officials reject Syria's justification for the Iranian presence, for two reasons. First, they maintain that Iran's overall strategy requires a second front against Israel. The clerical regime is implacably opposed to the existence of Israel, but without a shared border its enemy remains out of reach. Iran's patronage of Hezbollah, which controls southern Lebanon, does give it such a shared border, if only indirectly; Hezbollah still has a significant degree of independence. Replicating this arrangement on the Syrian border with Israel would be a natural strategic goal for Iran. Second, the Israelis consider Syrian President Bashar al-Assad an Iranian puppet and suspect that he has neither the will nor the power to resist Iran's campaign to turn the Syrian state into a platform for what Tehran, they think, regards as an inevitable war against Israel.

Most Israeli and Western military and intelligence analysts seem to disagree. In their eyes, the Syrian regime has significant autonomy and only a weak sense of obligation to Iran. Assad, the thought goes, would not have launched a catastrophic war only to hand over control of his country to Tehran. In 2013, a Syrian official told me that the regime wanted to end the war as quickly as possible, because the sooner it ended, the sooner the Iranians could be shipped back home. Lebanon, he pointed out, had never managed to oust its Iranian proxy fighters, and it is now a shambles. (He did not add that it was Syria that gave Iran access to Lebanon, for its own ill-advised reasons.)

The Assad regime is also keenly aware of the risk of war with Israel should Iran become entrenched near the border. Its goal at this point is to reassert control over southwestern Syria and encourage the redeployment of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, which separated Israeli and Syrian troops on the Golan Heights before the civil war broke out in 2011. Assad needs to conserve his military power to retake territory in the east, reestablish control over Syria's oil fields, and eventually reconquer Idlib in the northwest. He would compromise his goal of reconsolidating

the Syrian state under his rule if he gets entangled in a conflict with the US and Israel.

Israel, too, is in a precarious position. It has no way of knowing if and when any military actions it takes to keep Iranian forces or their proxies from digging in on the border between Syria and Israel will elicit an Iranian-instigated response on the Lebanese border. Hezbollah's extensive arsenal of rockets, some long-range, would cause significant Israeli civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. A missile barrage would therefore give Israel little choice but to enter Lebanon by force with the purpose of disarming and destroying Hezbollah. The long range of Hezbollah rockets suggests that many of these weapons will be deployed in northern Lebanon, which would draw Israeli ground forces much farther into Lebanese territory than they had been when they invaded southern Lebanon in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war, or during the war of 2006. A deeper Israeli penetration now would push a new wave of refugees northward into areas already packed with Syrians fleeing the ongoing civil war.

To buttress its air campaign against Iranian targets in Syria, Israel has been arming and equipping seven Sunni rebel militias on the Syrian side of the border as a buffer against Iranian-supported Shia fighters. This program, which reprises Israel's approach in southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000, is likely to draw Hezbollah into the area in an effort to extirpate the Sunni rebels, who threaten the Syrian regime's territorial control. Israel's preemptive strategy might then become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For the moment, the confrontation between Israel and Iran has devolved to an uneasy impasse. Meanwhile, the US, in its effort to support Israel in that conflict, has turned its attention to other methods of diminishing Iran's power in the region: promoting regime change in Syria—in theory, a relatively moderate Sunni successor regime in Damascus would cut off Iran's access to Syrian territory—or, failing that, using military force to narrow the land corridors that Iran uses to move fighters from Iraq into western Syria.

The US has not yet disclosed any strategy for overthrowing Assad's regime, perhaps because tensions are already high between Washington and Moscow, and since Trump seems reluctant to offend Russia. It is equally possible that there is no plan. But former secretary of state Rex Tillerson did explain in February, before he was fired, that the military was hoping to weaken and eventually bankrupt the Assad regime by taking vigorous measures to preserve US and Kurdish control of oil fields in central Syria. In congressional testimony, David Satterfield, the acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, has justified an open-ended US military presence in Syria partly on the basis of the need to separate the Assad regime from Iran.

At a rally in Ohio on March 29, Trump himself questioned the merits of that strategy. "We're knocking the hell out of ISIS," he declared. "We'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon.... Let the other people take care of it now.... We got [sic] to get back to our country where we belong, where we want to be." The National Security Council, the State Department, and the Pentagon were bewildered by what appeared to be a spontaneous, uncoordinated policy reversal. (The State Department declined to respond to my request for a clarification.) They were not the only ones. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been counting on the Trump administration to roll back Iranian power in the region, starting with Syria. The withdrawal of the two thousand US troops currently deployed to the eastern part of Syria would forfeit that trust.

Although Israel and the Gulf Arabs are still anxious about Iran's nuclear ambitions, they are far more preoccupied by its activities in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen. The Saudis and Emiratis urged the US to increase its support for their calamitous intervention in Yemen, and the Saudis tried to decapitate the Lebanese government or force it to oppose Hezbollah's influence. The Gulf Arabs only reluctantly took steps to keep Iraq afloat economically after the hugely destructive campaign against ISIS. Most of all, these nations want Iran out of Syria and the Assad regime overthrown, and so far they have relied on the Trump administration to pursue those goals. Right now, however, the president seems no more eager than his predecessor to play along.

On the other hand, the accession of John Bolton to the post of national security adviser and the nomination of CIA Director Mike Pompeo as secretary of state suggest that the Trump administration is more likely to continue its current policy than reverse it. Bolton has been a fierce critic of the Iranian regime and of US administrations that, in his view, accommodated it. Like many Americans, he sees Iran both as a strategic menace capable of dominating the Middle East and as a weak and desperate state that the US could easily overcome. These inconsistent views make it likelier that his policy prescriptions will have violent outcomes.

It is unclear how the new team will reconcile the desire to thwart Iran in Syria with the president's urge to disengage. One indication might be Bolton's idea for an "Arab force" composed of military units from the Gulf Cooperation Council and Egypt, which would replace the US troops now in Syria. Setting aside the possibility that Saudi Arabia and the UAE would open fire on Qatari troops rather than on the Syrian regime or ISIS, these countries do not have the capacity to sustain a military occupation of Syrian territory for long. And there can be little doubt that such a force, isolated in the Syrian desert and surrounded by hostile tribes, would soon find itself under attack by Iran and the Assad regime.

Regardless of how many US troops stay in Syria, the Trump administration's apparent determination to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal could easily put the United States on a collision course with Iran, especially if Iran responded by resuming uranium enrichment. The US could try to impose what it has repeatedly called "crippling" sanctions on Iran, but there is little reason to think that Iran would be deterred from its nuclear program by the threat of economic penalties. The largest expansion of Iran's nuclear infrastructure took place under a vast and intricate regime of sanctions. Between 2006, when nuclear-related UN sanctions were first put in place, and 2013, when the interim deal freezing Iran's capability was agreed on, the number of centrifuges increased from few, if any, to nearly 20,000. During this period, the UNSC hit Iran with five sanctions resolutions, including an especially punitive one in 2010. Given that Iran was installing about 3,000 centrifuges per year while under intensive

sanctions, had there not been the agreement, Iran would now have yet another 15,000 centrifuges.

If these precedents are any indication, Iran's antagonists would be left with just one option: the physical destruction of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. For some, like Bolton and Pompeo, this is a desirable outcome. They believe that an attack on Iran, which would probably involve strikes against targets associated with the regime, such as the Republican Guards, would usher in a new era of American dominance. The Iranian people would supposedly welcome the United States as their liberator, repudiate the clerical regime's regional ambitions, and put aside their nationalist views to accommodate Israel's existence and seek a rapprochement with the Arab kingdoms to the west.

Here, too, some uncertainty is in order. The Trump administration's highly confrontational stances on trade and North Korea have softened over time in favor of negotiation; steel and aluminum tariffs on allies have been rolled back; and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin has been cultivating China's newly appointed trade czar. Though Trump has repeatedly threatened to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal, it is still possible—in view of his apparent desire, at least for the moment, to avoid complications abroad—that he will simply refuse to certify Iranian compliance, which would leave it to Congress to take further steps.

This is a volatile administration. Even aside from its internal policy differences, it makes haphazard, ill-disciplined decisions that often cause confusion: following the use of chemical weapons at Douma, it simultaneously pushed at the UN for sanctions against Russia and issued a White House declaration rejecting sanctions. In the short term, the chasm that has separated the president from his national security team might narrow. The national security adviser believes he can sway the president's judgment by catering to his instincts, which tend to be bellicose and impulsive. The US may still clash with Iran in Syria. Even if it does not, regional allies could use the president's defection there to pressure him to follow through on his pledge to "tear up" the nuclear agreement and

proceed toward regime change in Tehran. In either of those events, the region would be likelier to descend into war.

—April 24, 2018

The End of Pax Americana
Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense
By Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson
Foreign Affairs
November/December 2015

The Obama administration has clearly pulled back from the United States' recent interventionism in the Middle East, notwithstanding the rise of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and the U.S.-led air war against it. Critics pin the change on the administration's aversion to U.S. activism in the region, its unwillingness to engage in major combat operations, or President Barack Obama's alleged ideological preference for diminished global engagement. But the reality is that Washington's post-9/11 interventions in the region—especially the one in Iraq—were anomalous and shaped false perceptions of a “new normal” of American intervention, both at home and in the region. The administration's unwillingness to use ground forces in Iraq or Syria constitutes not so much a withdrawal as a correction—an attempt to restore the stability that had endured for several decades thanks to American restraint, not American aggressiveness.

It's possible to argue that pulling back is less a choice than a necessity. Some realist observers claim that in a time of economic uncertainty and cuts to the U.S. military budget, an expansive U.S. policy in the region has simply become too costly. According to that view, the United States, like the United Kingdom before it, is the victim of its own “imperial overstretch.” Others argue that U.S. policy initiatives, especially the recent negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, have distanced Washington from its traditional Middle Eastern allies; in other words, the United States isn't pulling back so much as pushing away.

The long period of American primacy in the Middle East is ending. In actuality, however, the main driver of the U.S. pullback is not what's happening in Washington but what's happening in the region. Political and economic developments in the Middle East have reduced the opportunities for effective American intervention to a vanishing point, and policymakers in Washington have been recognizing that and acting accordingly. Given

this, the moderate U.S. pullback should be not reversed but rather continued, at least in the absence of a significant threat to core U.S. interests.

BACK TO NORMAL

Between World War II and the 9/11 attacks, the United States was the quin-essential status quo power in the Middle East, undertaking military intervention in the region only in exceptional circumstances. Direct U.S. military involvement was nonexistent, minimal, or indirect in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the 1956 Suez crisis, the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. The 1982–84 U.S. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon was a notorious failure and gave rise to the “overwhelming force” doctrine, which precluded subsequent U.S. interventions until Saddam Hussein’s extraordinarily reckless invasion of Kuwait forced Washington’s hand in 1990.

Washington didn’t need a forward-leaning policy because U.S. interests largely coincided with those of its strategic allies and partners in the region and could be served through economic and diplomatic relations combined with a modest military presence. The United States and the Gulf Arab states shared a paramount need to maintain stable oil supplies and prices and, more broadly, political stability. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states have had the mutual objective of containing Iran. Beginning with the Camp David accords in 1978, American, Egyptian, and Israeli interests converged, and their trilateral relationship was reinforced by substantial U.S. aid to Egypt and Israel alike. And even after 9/11, the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Arab states had shared priorities in their fights against terrorism.

Over the past decade, however, several factors largely unrelated to Washington’s own policy agenda have weakened the bases for these alliances and partnerships. First, the advent of hydraulic fracturing has dramatically reduced direct U.S. dependence on Gulf oil and diminished the strategic value and priority of the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf Arab states: indeed, the United States will soon

overtake Saudi Arabia as the world's largest producer of crude oil and will need to import less fossil fuel. Although Gulf producers will keep determining the world price of oil and U.S. companies will continue to have a stake in the Gulf's wells, the United States will enjoy greater policy discretion and flexibility.

The spread and intensification of jihadism have also weakened the strategic links between the United States and its regional partners. A decade ago, a combination of American pressure and the shock of large-scale al Qaeda attacks inside Saudi Arabia convinced the Saudis and their neighbors to clamp down on jihadist activities within their own borders. Yet today, the Gulf Arab states have subordinated the suppression of jihadism to the goal of overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and hobbling his patrons in Iran. They are doing this by backing Sunni extremist rebels in Syria despite Washington's exhortations to stop and Saudi Arabia's own desire to avoid a post-Assad Syria ruled by radicals. The United States' regional partners see themselves as less and less answerable to Washington, and Washington feels less obligated to protect the interests of those partners, which seem increasingly parochial and remote from American interests and values. In addition, widespread Islamic radicalization has driven the emergence of a genuine pan-Islamic identity that complicates Western involvement in the Middle East. Consider, for example, the unwillingness of many moderate Sunni Syrian opponents of Assad to accept European or U.S. help, which they believe will disqualify them in the eyes of Islamists.

Meanwhile, from the United States' standpoint, the Middle East has become a highly dubious place to invest owing to systemic political and economic dysfunction. The region features little water, sparse agriculture, and a massive oversupply of labor. Of the Middle Eastern countries that still function, most run large fiscal and external deficits, maintain huge and inefficient civil service payrolls, and heavily subsidize fuel and other necessities for their populations; lower oil revenues will probably limit the Gulf states' ability to finance those creaky mechanisms. Active conflicts in many Middle Eastern states have displaced large proportions of their populations and deprived their young people of educational opportunities and hope for the future. These conditions have produced either abject

despair or, what is more ominous, political and religious radicalization. The effort to remake the Middle East as an incubator of liberal democracy that would pacify young Muslims failed even when the United States had plenty of cash to throw at the project and more reasons for optimism about its prospects, in the years immediately following the 9/11 attacks.

Finally, groups within Middle Eastern societies that were once reliable bastions of pro-Western sentiment—such as national militaries, oil-industry elites, and secular technocrats—have generally seen their influence wane. And in instances where traditional pro-Western elements have retained power, their interests and policies now increasingly diverge from American ones. The Egyptian military, for example, served for decades as a pillar of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. Thanks to the coup it launched in 2013 that placed the former army general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the top of a new authoritarian regime, the military now exerts more control than ever in Egypt. But this hardly augurs well for Washington: if past is prologue, the military's brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood will almost certainly lead to an increase in jihadist violence and thus expose the United States to the very blowback that its assistance to Egypt is intended to prevent. Hopes in the 1950s and 1960s for the ascendance of a secular, technocratic, Western-oriented Arab elite that would bring their societies with them have long since faded.

POWERFUL BUT POWERLESS

At the same time that the salience of the Middle East to U.S. policy is waning and the interests of the United States and its traditional partners in the Middle East are diverging, the potential for American military power to effect major change in the region is also diminishing. The decentralization of al Qaeda and the emergence of ISIS, a jihadist expeditionary force and quasi state, have increased the asymmetries between U.S. military capabilities and the most urgent threats facing the region. As U.S.-occupied Iraq slid toward civil war in 2006, the Pentagon moved toward improving U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and practice, revamping the military's structure to emphasize irregular warfare and special operations. But liberal and accountable democratic governments find it difficult to marshal either

the staying power or the savagery that is usually required to suppress an unruly and committed indigenous group—especially a regionwide social movement such as ISIS, which does not recognize physical or political boundaries. This is particularly true when outside powers have no local partners with substantial bureaucratic cohesion or popular legitimacy. The United States still has the resources and resilience to sustain wars against modern nationalist states that would end with clear victors and enforceable outcomes. But Americans have learned the hard way that a transnational clash of ethnicities turbocharged by religious narratives is vastly harder to navigate, let alone manipulate.

A U.S.-led military operation against ISIS, for instance, would no doubt produce impressive and gratifying battlefield victories. But the aftermath of the conflict would drive home the ultimate futility of the project. Solidifying any tactical gains would require political will backed by the support of the American public; a large cadre of deployable civilian experts in reconstruction and stabilization; deep knowledge of the society for whose fate a victorious United States would take responsibility; and, most problematic, a sustained military force to provide security for populations and infrastructure. Even if all those conditions were present, Washington would struggle to find dependable and dedicated local constituents or clients, or indeed allies, to assist. If this sounds familiar, it is because it is the same list of things that Washington wasn't able to put together the last two times it launched major military interventions in the Middle East, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the NATO air campaign against Libya in 2011. Put simply, the United States would likely lose another war in the Middle East for all the same reasons it lost the last two.

Even a less intensive, counterterrorism-based approach to ISIS, which would involve steady drone strikes and periodic commando operations, would carry grave risks. Collateral damage from U.S. drone attacks, for example, has made it harder for the Pakistani government to extend deeper cooperation to the United States. Five years ago, U.S. military officials took great pride in special operations raids in Afghanistan that resulted in the death or capture of high-value Taliban operatives. But the civilian casualties

the raids produced undermined strategic goals by enraging locals and driving them back into the Taliban's orbit.

For these reasons, U.S. policymakers should entertain serious doubts about taking ownership of any of the Middle East's ongoing conflicts. Precisely those kinds of doubts explain and justify the Obama administration's unwillingness to intervene more forcefully in Syria. For a period in 2012 and early 2013, the administration considered a full range of options for Syria, including U.S.-enforced no-fly and buffer zones, regime change by force (facilitated by far more substantial American and allied military assistance to anti-Assad rebels), and limited retaliatory air strikes against the regime in response to its use of chemical weapons. But the growing involvement of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah in defending Assad would have meant an unabashed U.S. proxy war with Iran that could have escalated and spilled over into the rest of region. That would have made it impossible to carry on fruitful talks with Tehran about curtailing its nuclear program and would have forced the United States to surpass Iran's high levels of commitment and investment in the conflict. In addition, a U.S.-led intervention would have enjoyed very little international backing: China and Russia would have vetoed any UN resolution authorizing it, just as they had vetoed far less muscular resolutions, and the Arab League and NATO would not have endorsed it. And major Western military action would likely have intensified the spread of jihadism in Syria, as it had elsewhere.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

The United States' primary interest in the Middle East is regional stability. For now at least, constraints on U.S. power and the complex, interdependent nature of U.S. interests in the region—as well as the likelihood of sustained U.S.-Chinese rivalry that will inevitably divert U.S. strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific region—suggest that the best Middle East policy for Washington would be something closer to what international relations theorists call “offshore balancing”: refraining from engagement in overseas military operations and forgoing quasi-imperial

nation building to focus instead on selectively using its considerable leverage to exert influence and protect U.S. interests. Washington needs to husband U.S. power in the Middle East, unless a genuine existential threat to its regional allies arises, which is unlikely. This course will require Washington to avoid any further projection of U.S. military power in the region—for example, a large-scale deployment of combat ground troops to fight ISIS.

Critics of U.S. restraint argue that in the absence of strongly asserted U.S. power, Iran or other U.S. nemeses will be emboldened—that restraint will lead to war. But U.S. adversaries will likely judge Washington’s resolve on the basis of conditions as they appear in the moment those adversaries are seriously considering aggressive actions, irrespective of conditions that existed years or months before. As long as the limits of U.S. restraint are clearly enunciated and Washington makes plain that its alliance with Israel remains undiminished, Iran will be loath to confront Israel or act much more aggressively in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or elsewhere in the region for fear of triggering a decisive American response that could scupper the nuclear deal and revive the painful sanctions that drove Tehran to the bargaining table in the first place. In any case, the question of whether saber rattling will provoke or deter a potential adversary can never be answered with complete confidence, since decision-makers often misjudge the perceptions and temperament of their rivals.

Whether rapprochement is a promising paradigm for U.S.-Iranian relations remains to be seen. Iran clearly seeks to exert its influence wherever it can, but it’s far from clear that it can dominate the region. Iranian influence in Iraq was aided by the vacuum created by the U.S. invasion but stems more broadly from the demographic and political primacy of Iraq’s Shiites and is thus unavoidable. As long as Baghdad remains dependent on the United States for countering ISIS, Washington should retain sufficient leverage to moderate Iraqi politics and limit Iran’s sway. Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen and for dissident Shiites in Bahrain is more opportunistic than strategic and therefore unlikely to permanently shift the balance of power in either place. Tehran’s meddling in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict doesn’t rise to the level of a strategic challenge: the

Palestinian militant group Hamas has not been able to translate Iranian largess into a serious advantage over Israel, let alone Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, all of which oppose Hamas. Iran's footholds in Lebanon and Syria go back decades, but even though its proxies in both places have steadily increased their commitment to defend the Assad regime, they have been unable to avert Syria's de facto partition. Even if Iran chooses to make Syria its Vietnam, the best it could probably manage against an externally supported anti-Assad opposition would be to consolidate the status quo while sharing the meager rewards with Moscow. Syria, then, would be a springboard for Iranian mischief but hardly a platform for controlling the region. In short, even with the nuclear deal in place, Iran won't be able to do much more now—and possibly even less—than it was able to do in the past.

The nuclear deal has produced a genuine split between the Americans and the Israelis, who believe that the deal's terms are too lenient and won't prevent the Iranians from developing a nuclear weapon. But the divide is unlikely to have dire practical consequences. Washington has an obligation to maintain its unique relationship with Israel and has a strategic interest in preserving bilateral links with the Israeli military, which is by far the region's most powerful fighting force. The nuclear deal with Iran also upset the Gulf Arab states. But Washington's global economic responsibilities and its substantial counterterrorist interests still require the United States to safeguard its strategic relationship with those countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. And the Gulf Arab states retain a stronger cultural connection with the United States than with any other major power: Gulf elites send their children to American universities as opposed to Chinese, Russian, or European ones.

The Israelis and the Gulf Arabs need not panic: prudence dictates a serviceable regional U.S. military presence to prevent ISIS from expanding further (into Jordan, for example) and to deter Iranian breaches of the nuclear deal and respond to any destabilizing Iranian moves, such as a major ground intervention in Iraq. The American military footprint in the region should not change. At least one U.S. carrier battle group should remain assigned to the Arabian Sea. The structure and personnel strength

of U.S. military bases in the Middle East should stay the same. The air campaign against ISIS should continue, and American troops will still need to be deployed occasionally on a selective basis to quell terrorist threats or even respond in a limited way to large-scale atrocities or environmental disasters. But a resolute policy of restraint requires that any major expeditionary military ground intervention on the part of the United States in the Middle East be avoided and that regional partners be encouraged to take on more responsibility for their own security.

AIM LOWER, SCORE HIGHER

In addition to affirming its pullback from the military interventionism of the post-9/11 era, Washington needs to recalibrate its diplomatic priorities. The aftermath of the Arab revolts of 2011—especially those in Egypt, Libya, and Syria—demonstrated that most Middle Eastern societies are not ready to take significant steps toward democracy, and so American attempts to promote further political liberalization in the region should be more subdued. U.S. officials should also recognize that a lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians is highly unlikely to take shape in the medium term. The United States’ dogged determination to accomplish that objective, even in the least propitious circumstances, has created a moral hazard. Successive Israeli governments have been able to thwart Washington’s peacemaking efforts with near impunity, confident that the Americans would continue to try no matter what. In turn, the United States’ inability to facilitate an agreement has contributed to perceptions of Washington as a declining power—even as some U.S. allies in the Gulf see U.S. pressure on Israel as another example of U.S. faithlessness as an ally.

The United States should always support the goals of democratization and Israeli-Palestinian peace. But in the medium term, rather than unrealistically clinging to those aims, Washington should try to capitalize on the Iran nuclear deal to improve relations with Tehran. If the implementation of the deal gets off to a relatively smooth start, Washington should probe Tehran’s flexibility in other areas with an eye to fostering a kind of *modus vivendi* between the Iranians and the Saudis—something that looks very unlikely now, as it has for years. One way to do so would be to bring Iran

and other governments together in an effort to end the Syrian civil war through a political agreement. The emerging recognition among the major players—the United States, Russia, Iran, and the Gulf Arab states—is that, although ISIS’ dream of a border-busting caliphate remains out of the group’s reach, the ongoing conflict in Syria risks dangerously empowering ISIS and accelerating the propagation of its extremist ideology.

But each player has also come to realize that its preferred method of solving the Syrian crisis is probably unworkable. For the United States and its Gulf partners, supporting forcible regime change by Syrian rebels who are increasingly infiltrated or co-opted by ISIS appears counterproductive as well as operationally dubious. At the same time, after more than four years of a military stalemate, it is clear that Iran’s ongoing support for Assad and Russia’s recent intensification of its aid to the regime can merely help maintain the status quo but cannot decisively swing conditions in Assad’s favor. Both Tehran and Moscow seem to understand that regardless of their support, Assad’s regime is weaker than ever and it will probably prove impossible to reconstitute a unitary Syria ruled exclusively by the regime. For mainly these reasons, both Iran and Russia have recently shown more interest in exploring a negotiated settlement. Although Russia’s protestations that it is not wedded to Assad are disingenuous, Moscow has supported the UN Security Council’s investigation of the regime’s apparent use of indiscriminate barrel bombs filled with poisonous chlorine gas and has backed the Security Council’s August 2015 statement reinvigorating the quest for a political transition in Syria. Tehran, with Hezbollah’s support, has been pushing a peace plan involving a national unity government and a revised constitution, although one under which Assad or his regime would remain in power at least in the short term.

A realistic mechanism for taking advantage of these tenuously converging interests has not materialized. But the Iran nuclear deal has demonstrated the potential of diplomacy to ameliorate regional crises. In addition to countering the spread of jihadism, a U.S.-brokered agreement to end the Syrian civil war would mitigate and eventually end the world’s most pressing humanitarian crisis and restore much of the American prestige that has waned in the region. Effective and inclusive conflict resolution on

Syria would also validate the rapprochement with Iran and might help convince the Israelis of the efficacy of the United States' new approach.

Washington should leverage the new diplomatic bonds that the nuclear negotiations forged among the major powers—and, in particular, between U.S. and Iranian officials—to reinvigorate multinational talks on Syria's transition. An initial step might be to reconvene the Geneva II conference, which foundered in February 2014, gathering the original parties and adding Iran to the mix. Russia's insistence that Assad's departure cannot be a precondition to political talks should not be a deal breaker and in fact could be an enticement for Iran to participate, which U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry might now be able to facilitate through a direct appeal to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The Gulf Arab states' cautious endorsement of the nuclear agreement and Saudi Arabia's participation in trilateral talks with the United States and Russia on Syria in early August suggest that the Gulf Arabs are growing more comfortable with diplomacy as a means of easing strategic tensions with Iran. On account of their heightened perception of the ISIS threat, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey might now drop their insistence that Assad depart prior to negotiations.

The hardest part, of course, will be arriving at plausible transitional arrangements. One possibility would be to create a power-sharing body with executive authority that could marginalize ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syria-based militant group affiliated with al Qaeda, as implicitly contemplated in the August UN Security Council statement. Another would be to partition the country to some degree and establish a confederacy of sorts to replace central rule from Damascus. Tactical cease-fires reached between the regime and moderate opposition forces could serve as the building blocks for those kinds of broader political arrangements and might also allow the parties to focus on fighting the jihadist factions, which represent a common enemy.

MATURE WITHDRAWAL

The long period of American primacy in the Middle East is ending. Although the Iraq war damaged Washington's credibility and empowered U.S. adversaries, by the time the United States invaded Iraq, the region was already becoming less malleable all on its own. The United States should not and cannot withdraw in a literal sense, but it should continue to pull back, both to service strategic priorities elsewhere and in recognition of its dwindling influence. Neither the United States nor its regional partners want to see Iran with nuclear weapons or substantially increased regional influence. And none of the main players in the region wants to see a quantum leap in the power of ISIS or other Salafi jihadist organizations. But because the United States' leverage has diminished, it must concentrate on forging regional stability. That would be a wiser approach than pushing for improbable political liberalization and a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as the Obama administration has done, or trying to transform the region through the use of force, a strategy that the Bush administration relied on with woeful results.

In particular, Washington must acknowledge that reducing its military role will mean that its allies will exercise greater independence in their own military decisions. In turn, U.S. allies need to understand just how much support Washington is willing to provide before they launch risky military adventures, such as Saudi Arabia's recent strikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Washington and its partners need better bilateral and multilateral communications and planning. Washington will need to be clearer about what might prompt it to intervene militarily and what level of force it would use, and it will need to initiate more detailed joint planning for the full range of its possible responses.

Israel still favors confronting Iran instead of smoothing relations, and Washington will have to strictly police the nuclear deal to convince the Israelis of its effectiveness. But as ISIS has risen, the Gulf Arab states and Turkey have warmed a bit to the United States' approach to Iran and to Washington's position that containing the spread of jihadism is now more important than achieving regime change in Syria.

For Washington to successfully commit itself to a constructive pullback from the Middle East, it will need to make its best efforts to avoid directly impeding the priorities of its regional allies and partners—and it should demand that its friends in the region do the same. That will require focused diplomacy supported by clear articulations of Washington’s commitment to its core interests. Washington should stress, in particular, that the Iran nuclear deal will actually ensure, rather than threaten, sustained U.S. diplomatic engagement in the region. Instead of reversing course, Washington needs to embrace the idea of establishing a healthier equilibrium in U.S.–Middle Eastern relations, one that involves a lighter management role for the United States. The military-centric interventionism of the past 14 years was an aberration from a longer history of American restraint; it must not harden into a new long-term norm.