



Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

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The winds of change are sweeping across the Middle East. With colleagues at the Center for a New American Security, I have written a report laying out the strategic adaptations needed to allow U.S. leaders to further American interests and values while contributing to greater regional security and political progress.

U.S. Interests in a Changing Middle East

Today, as in the past, America has five principal interests in the Middle East, but the contours of the relevant challenges have changed.

- **Deterring, containing and defending against regional threats.** With the Iraq war ended and troops being drawn down in Afghanistan, the main focus is on limiting and channeling Iran's ambitions.
- **Supporting Arab regimes that have legitimacy in the eyes of their own people.** For decades, America placed a priority on security cooperation with authoritarian regimes in order to fight terrorism and stabilize oil prices. Democracy and human rights took a back seat. Today, however, the United States cannot ignore social upheavals and democratic reform movements spreading across the region.
- **Fighting terrorism.** Efforts to defeat al Qaeda pushed the U.S. into close ties to sclerotic regimes (such as those in Yemen and Egypt) that later proved unstable. Terrorism remains a serious threat, but the threat has been partially contained and new measures are needed.
- **Enhancing Israeli security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.** The United States remains committed to enhancing Israeli security through military aid, intelligence collaboration and other means. Progress toward Arab-Israeli peace, long a prominent part of support for Israel, has become even more in the U.S. interest today.
- **Ensuring stable access to affordable oil.** While Gulf oil remains important to the global economy as a whole, increased domestic natural gas production and progress on alternative fuels and energy conservation have made the U.S. economy less dependent on Gulf supplies.

Strategic Adaptation to the New Realities

As both the Mideast realities and U.S. interests there have shifted, so should immediate U.S. policies in the region. America must seek to manage unfolding transformations, while still dealing with short-term blowups – like the recent embassy attacks – and festering tensions between our various partners in the region. **Over the near term**, the key priorities are:

- **continue to work against Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons**, emphasizing economic sanctions and diplomacy before any turn to risky military attacks.
- **ease rising suspicion between Israeli governments and Egypt's new civilian leaders.** The U.S. should convene and facilitate meetings between political and military actors from both countries and be prepared to conduct shuttle diplomacy, or facilitate a dialogue between both sides, to de-escalate tensions whenever crises flare.
- **pursue a policy of "forceful diplomacy" in Syria, but not direct military intervention.** Recognizing the limitations of its leverage, the United States should work with other governments to help bring about a political transition that includes removing Asad from power, contain the Syrian civil war, discourage human rights abuses, and prevent chemical and biological weapons from being used inside Syria or transferred across borders. Direct military intervention should only be resorted to if there is no other option for achieving these objectives, and if there is a viable military strategy and a broad-based international coalition.

The Path to Long-term Stability

Traditionally, the United States has not supported democratization in the Middle East, because policymakers felt that the American interest in stability could best be safeguarded by alliances with ruling elites. But today, the U.S. interest in stability can no longer be effectively pursued without more attention to democratizing forces. American policymakers should:

- engage Arab publics, not just regimes – and prioritize democratic reform over mere regime stability. In future years, regional stability will be found not at the expense of democratic reform, but through it.
- **pursue a carefully calibrated strategy toward different manifestations of politically active Islam.** Some Islamic parties and political organizations cater to violence and extremism and must be opposed. But others are prepared to accommodate basic democratic norms and practices, and must be constructively engaged by U.S. diplomats and security officials.
- **support inclusive social and economic reforms.** Unemployment and the lack of career prospects for Arab youth are drivers of radicalism, as are denials of education and rights to women. Debt relief and investment in Arab economies are vital, and for a time the United States should forego efforts to impose economic rules that increase poverty.

Finally, as the United States engages Arab publics and prioritizes democratic reforms, Israel's concerns may grow. U.S. leaders must remain reassuringly steadfast about Israel's security, even as they seek to firmly contain Iran's most destructive ambitions, foster new forms of cooperation between Israel and Egypt, and push forward with a revitalized effort to reach an enduring settlement of Israeli-Palestinian disputes. America's strategic imperatives in the Middle East endure, but they must be pursued in new ways given the transformations remaking the region.

Read more in Bruce W. Jentleson, Andrew M. Exum, Melissa G. Dalton and J. Dana Stuster, "Strategic Adaptation: Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," Center for a New American Security, June 2012.

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