

THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST: AMERICA'S ROLE IN A CHANGING REGION

A BROOKINGS INTERVIEW

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*For about 20 years since the end of the Cold War, the regional power dynamics of the Middle East were relatively stable, and United States was the uncontested and dominant external power. Today, a combination of the upheavals, revolutions, and civil wars in the region, U.S. war fatigue, the shale energy revolution, and the return of great power competition have dramatically transformed the geopolitics of the Middle East. In September 2018, **Bruce Jones**, director of the Brookings Foreign Policy Program, convened 10 Brookings experts—**Jeffrey Feltman, Samantha Gross, Martin Indyk, Kemal Kirişci, Suzanne Maloney, Bruce Riedel, Natan Sachs, Amanda Sloat, Angela Stent, and Tamara Cofman Wittes**—to discuss new geopolitical alignments in the Middle East and the future of U.S. policy in the region. The edited transcript below reflects their assessments of the landscape of the new geopolitics of the Middle East; the reality and perception of U.S. withdrawal from the region; the strategic interests and goals of major regional actors; the interactions between these regional actors, including in proxy wars; and policy recommendations for U.S. strategy going forward.*

DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY

The perception of U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East overstates reality, but American influence in the region is certainly on the decline. The United States retains a significant troop presence in the region, but the American public has limited support for military engagement in Middle Eastern conflicts. The perception that the United States is no longer dependent on the region's oil supplies is not borne out by the realities of the global oil market, but does shape contemporary American decisionmaking. The United States has stepped back from diplomatic leadership on the Middle East peace process and conflict management across the region. Only on issues related to Iran has the United States had a sustained—but not consistent—focus.

Other actors have been inserting themselves into regional decisionmaking. As these two dynamics converge, a new geopolitical structure is evolving. It has six primary countries—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, the United States, and Russia. Others, like Egypt, maintain some of their past influence, although at significantly diminished levels. China does not currently play a central role in directing regional affairs, but is building its economic and diplomatic ties across the region and is poised to be more influential in the future.

The primary actors have distinct strategic objectives. Iran and Saudi Arabia seek to balance each other. Israel seeks to counter both Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions, and engages in a conflict management, rather than conflict resolution, approach toward the Palestinians. It shares with Saudi Arabia the strategic objective of containing Iran, but Saudi Arabia and Arab public opinion place limits on the depth of Saudi-Israeli cooperation. Turkey has a dual Islamic-nationalist strategy, and is increasingly involved in regional affairs. Russia seeks to protect state sovereignty and gain influence at the expense of the United States.

The split in the Gulf Cooperation Council has resulted in a strengthening of ties between Turkey and Qatar, two powers aligned with or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, versus Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who oppose the Brotherhood. The split has pushed Qatar into closer ties with Iran, probably temporarily. American diplomatic efforts to smooth the rift have not succeeded. President Trump's interest in forging a new Middle East Security Alliance has been delayed as a consequence of this and other developments.

American strategy in the region is confused, at best. U.S. diplomatic engagement to push for a regional economic and military framework that would support stability and limit Iran's reach might still deliver results, but it would require the United States to convince its putative partners in the region that it has staying power.

Editor's note: *This interview was conducted prior to the October 2, 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, by Saudi agents in their country's consulate in Istanbul. An addendum, by Bruce Riedel and Kemal Kirişci, briefly discusses the geopolitical ramifications of this murder. Also, as we were going to press, President Trump announced his decision to fully withdraw from Syria (and then appeared to modulate it).*

I. THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

BRUCE JONES: The United States has been at war with one set of actors or another in the Middle East continuously since 2003. And as Bruce Riedel has written,¹ it has been involved in military adventures and misadventures for a lot longer than that. But I think there's no real doubt that there have been two qualitative shifts in the past couple of years.

One is the wider breakdown of regional order and dramatic intensification of violence in the region since the Arab Spring took a wrong turn, so to speak.² If you look at the 2000s, about 8 percent of all global battle deaths occurred in the Middle East. In the last five years, it's grown to 70 percent. To put it in starker terms, if you include Afghanistan and a wider arc of instability, 95 percent of all global battle deaths over the past five years have been in majority-Muslim countries. You hear talk about a global upturn in violence and conflict—that's not true. Conflict is on the decline in every region of the world except for the Middle East and North Africa.

The second major trend, which is harder to quantify, is the qualitative shift in the perception of America's role and presence—a broad perception of America pulling back or not carrying the weight it once did. Whether it's empirically true or not, there's clearly a broad perception of that.

Those strike me as the two key developments, but against a backdrop of huge economic growth in countries like Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Russia in the 2000s, and economic doldrums in Egypt long before the Arab Spring, made worse by it. We thus have a very different texture to the geopolitics of the region, and that's where I want to start.

Natan, how would you frame the geopolitics of the Middle East today?

NATAN SACHS: The geopolitical structure of the Middle East has changed dramatically since 2011, and you could trace the roots of this shift even earlier. During the 2000s, when you asked, "what is happening in the Middle East?," you'd first ask "what does Washington think?," then "what do the main Arab capitals think?"—Cairo, Damascus, and initially also Baghdad—and then of course we'd think of other countries as well. Today we barely ask about those Arab capitals. Damascus is nearing the end of a horrific civil war, Baghdad has been looking inward since 2003, and Cairo has been focused domestically since 2011. These three major Arab countries, most notably Egypt, are no longer major geostrategic players in the region.

Now, when trying to understand regional events, you instead focus on those countries that survived 2011 without upheaval. Some, in fact, grew economically. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel stand out in particular. The Saudis (partnered closely with the United Arab Emirates, although they do have different interests in various places) are really the only Arab state that belongs at the highest level of the region's geopolitical structure. Iran, for its part, remains a major player despite enormous problems of its own. Although it has also had domestic upheaval, it did not suffer in 2011 in the same way that others did, and its decisions affect events throughout the region, often playing the adversary to the United States. Then comes Turkey, which under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is looking much more toward the Middle East than it did before. He's sometimes referred to as the "sultan"—a reference to Ottoman days, when Turkey dominated the region—and clearly feels more comfortable than his predecessors in operating in regional affairs. He's closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and with Qatar. And, finally, Israel remains stable, has seen tremendous economic growth, and, because of changes in the region, has growing alliances with major Sunni Arab countries.

There are two important countries to add, of course: the United States and Russia. First, the United States remains essential, although perhaps not in the way it was before the Barack Obama years. Many in the region have clearly perceived the United States as receding from the region—this was the case under Obama, and

1 Bruce Riedel, "1958: When America first went to war in the Middle East," *Brookings Institution*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/02/1958-when-america-first-went-to-war-in-the-middle-east/>.

2 Bruce Jones, Charles T. Call, Daniel Toubolets, and Jason Fritz, "Managing the new threat landscape: Adapting the tools of international peace and security," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, September 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20180919_prevention_agenda1.pdf.

in some ways, I think that's perhaps even more of the case under Donald Trump. But the United States is obviously still a key player. Second, Russia has entered the region—or perhaps re-entered if you consider it a successor to the Soviet Union—particularly in Syria. You've seen regional leaders going to Moscow, including for key diplomatic summits. For recent discussions on the future of Idlib, in Syria, few even thought about schlepping to Washington, heading instead to speak to Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

So the shorthand, I'd say, is four-plus-two. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, plus the United States and Russia. And, if we include Egypt, which still wants to be a major player, and in some cases such as Gaza still is, perhaps it's four-plus-two-plus-one.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Perhaps we could change the dynamic to four-plus-two-plus-one-plus-a-half, with the half being Abu Dhabi. I mean that in two ways. One, it is all about Abu Dhabi, it's not about the UAE. Dubai has strikingly different foreign policy views than Abu Dhabi. Dubai wants to be to Iran what Hong Kong or Singapore are to China. Abu Dhabi has an antagonistic relationship with Iran. And the other reason it's a half is that as wealthy as Abu Dhabi is, it's a city-state. And it has all the weaknesses of being a city-state. The Pentagon likes to call it the "Sparta of the Middle East." They think that is a compliment. I would remind people, Sparta produced nothing, and today is a field in the Peloponnese.

But Abu Dhabi has outsized influence. It now controls more ports in the Horn of Africa and Yemen than any other country. The forces it's arrayed in Yemen are the real ground forces, not the Saudis anymore. It's become what Qatar was about 10 years ago when Hamad bin Jassim was the half and conspired to be the whole in influencing the region. Now we really have Mohammed bin Zayed.

MARTIN INDYK: On the other hand, we shouldn't exaggerate it. The Emiratis are still the little guy compared to the Saudis. And when they try to push something the Saudis don't agree with, they don't succeed. The Emiratis have been trying to promote a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen and the Saudis have not been willing to play ball with them on that.

BRUCE JONES: It strikes me that Qatar's earlier activism, as a small country playing a role diplomatically outsize to its actual weight in the region, likely propelled a response from Abu Dhabi.

MARTIN INDYK: And Qatar continues to play that role but with a much lower profile. It's still mediating in many countries, including Gaza, Turkey, and the United States, and elsewhere in the region. They've just lowered their profile.

SUZANNE MALONEY: I want to comment on the formula itself because I think we would be giving Egypt too much credit by counting it as a full-fledged major player in the region when in reality the region's center of gravity has been shifting toward the Gulf for quite some time. The Egyptians remain a significant actor with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but even there, are they more significant today than Jordan? It's not clear to me that they are. And since at least the end of the first Gulf War, I don't think that they've been a major security player in the dynamics across the region, which is a remarkable shift in the way we formulate our interests in the region.

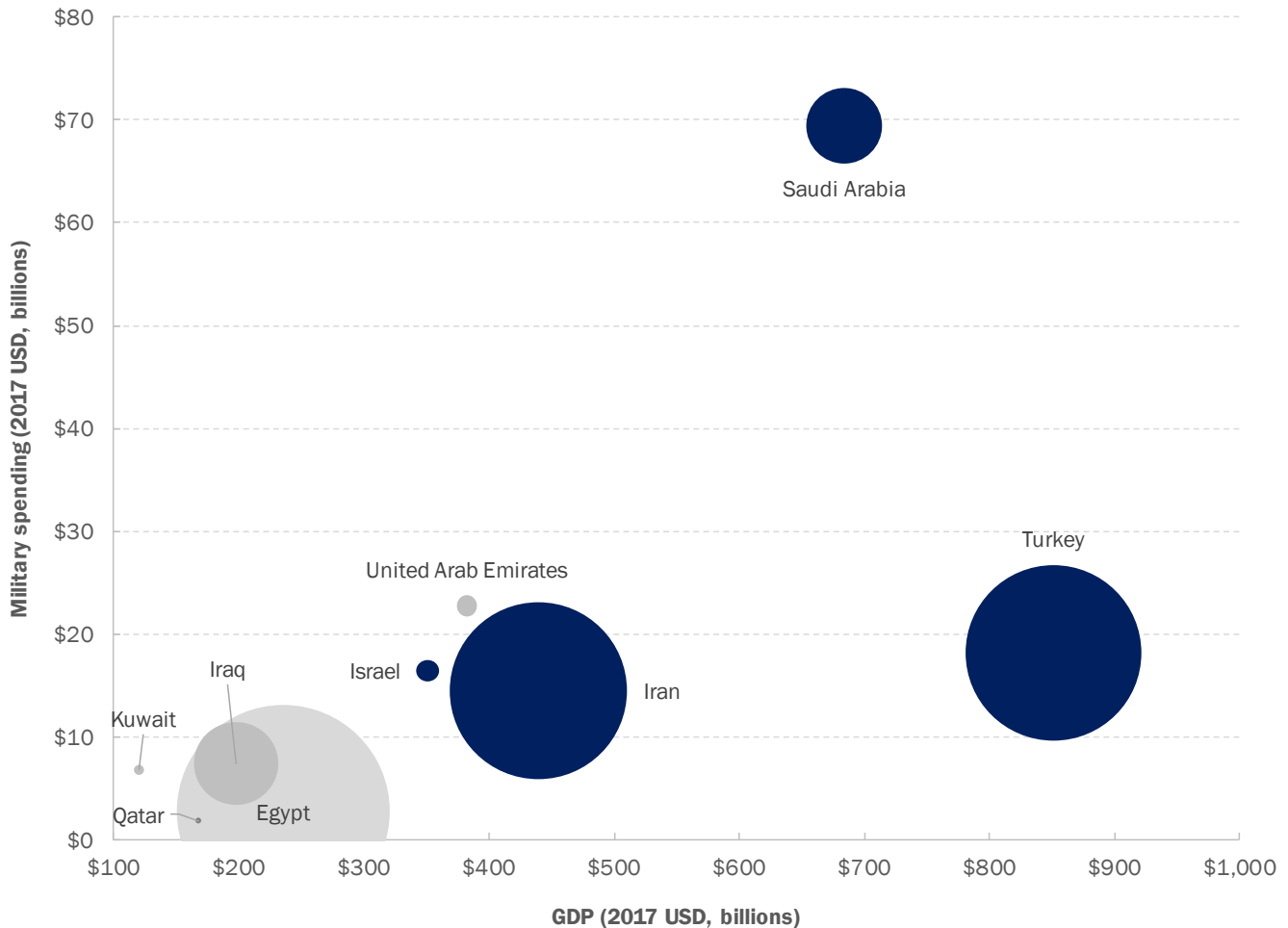
NATAN SACHS: Suzanne's point is a good one, it's just hard for me to think of the most populous Arab country not being on the list. Still, "plus-one" almost denotes its absence from the main list.

SUZANNE MALONEY: You can explain away the vacuum of Arab leadership at this particular moment when it comes to other major Arab states, particularly Iraq, as a consequence of conflict. But there is no real explanation for Egypt. How did the country go from being the most dynamic and significant actor in the Arab world from the 1950s onward to near irrelevance, with the exception of the conflict happening on its own borders today? And that to me is part of the story of what's happened in the Middle East and part of the driver of both conflict and of our intervention.

NATAN SACHS: That will probably change, Egypt is too big to remain dormant.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Let's not forget about Iraq, which has significant deposits of oil and natural gas, and a population that's large enough to be significant. If you were to ask, "what is the power that is going to break this four-plus-two-plus-one structure and emerge and become another power?," it's almost certainly the Iraqis. They will come back at some point.

GDP, MILITARY SPENDING, AND POPULATIONS OF THE LARGEST ECONOMIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Note: Size of bubble indicates relative population.

II. THE REALITY AND PERCEPTION OF U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

BRUCE JONES: Martin, you've been involved in American diplomacy and strategy in the Middle East for a couple of decades. How do you see this question of an American pull-back? Is that an accurate depiction of where we are? How strong is that perception, and how much does it matter?

MARTIN INDYK: Yes, I think it is an accurate description of American withdrawal and retrenchment from the region. To understand it, we have to put it in historical context. The rise to dominance of the United States in the Middle East began after the Yom Kippur War in October 1973, 45 years ago. The outcome of that war, with the heavy involvement of Henry Kissinger as secretary of state to President Richard Nixon, resulted in the establishment of an American-led effort to reconcile Israel and its Arab neighbors. That became the basis for what I would call a Pax Americana that was one part of the growth of America's influence in the region. The

heart of that Pax Americana was the stealing of Egypt out of the Soviet Union's pocket, which happened at the beginning of this American-led peace process. And to some extent Syria as well.

The arc of American influence started rising through President Jimmy Carter's successful efforts to broker the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty that took Egypt out of the conflict with Israel and in effect ended the state-to-state conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The Oslo Accords and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty under President Bill Clinton represented the high point of America's engagement in the peace process. At the same time, as Natan alluded to, the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and the eviction of Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait led to a dramatic boost to America's stature in the region. By the 1990s, the United States was the dominant power of the Middle East.

The arc started to bend downward at the end of the Clinton administration with the failure to achieve a breakthrough between first Israel and Syria, and then between Israel and the Palestinians at Camp David. And that was then followed by the outbreak of the intifada, which looked like anything but peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and by the American-led invasion of Iraq. And that is when American influence began to decline rather precipitously.

The failure of the peace process, the opening of the gates of Babylon to Iran's influence, and the Arab revolutions really combined in a perfect storm to dramatically reduce America's influence in the region to the point that when Obama comes along, there's a war weariness on the part of the American public and a deeply held conviction by Obama that he was elected to end wars, not get involved in new ones. Therefore the United States only got involved in the opening of the conflict in Libya and avoided any kind of serious engagement in Syria, opening the way for Russia to come back into the region.

What's important to understand in this process is, first of all, the decline in American influence also coincides, not coincidentally, with a failure to get any traction toward resolving these rather costly conflicts. It's been 20 years since the last Israeli-Palestinian agreement, notwithstanding every president, including President Trump, trying their hand at resolving this. And I believe that this is directly related to the decline in overall U.S. influence.

The second point is that along the way, the United States' strategic interest in the region changed rather dramatically because of the natural gas revolution in the United States, which made us no longer dependent on Middle Eastern oil. And so one of the most important strategic interests we had in the region, which was to ensure the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf area at reasonable prices, remains an interest, but is no longer a vital strategic interest to the United States. Combined with the failure of our efforts in Iraq, and more broadly in Afghanistan, this leads to a lack of will to commit American forces to the region amid a pivot to Asia, where our strategic interests are greater. This combination leaves the United States in the situation where it is in effect withdrawing from the region and no longer willing or even able to play the major role that it once did.

BRUCE JONES: You're telling a story of the arc of influence being charted through diplomacy, with diplomatic failures and the deployment of large-scale forces into the region in the Iraq War as the beginning of the turn. Influence is often depicted as a matter of troop numbers. You're telling a very different story about the nature of leadership.

MARTIN INDYK: Yes, but it was always diplomacy backed by the threat of the use of force, without which your diplomacy is that of a middle to small power, rather than a superpower.

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES: I agree with Martin that the greater investment of military presence followed diplomacy and is a necessary adjunct to diplomacy. The large-scale presence of military force that began in the 1990s was an outgrowth of the Gulf War and the need for containment after the war all the way through 2003 and beyond. But inevitably, when that military presence began to scale down after the surge during the Iraq War, the perception of governments in the region was of military withdrawal because relatively speaking, that's how it looked.

AMANDA SLOAT: This is reflected in the late and limited American military role in Syria, as President Obama saw American fatigue with Middle East conflicts and was reluctant to put boots on the ground there. He decided not to get involved in the Syrian civil war. He only sent troops—and even then a small number of special operators—to serve primarily as advisors to local partners in the fight against the Islamic State, given the group's threat to the American homeland and regional allies.

SUZANNE MALONEY: It was the Iran-Iraq War that brought the United States into the Persian Gulf in a much more substantive way. The story of American involvement in the Middle East that Martin has told is seen largely through the prioritization of the Middle East peace process in American strategy in the area. But in many ways, that's not the only story of American involvement in the Middle East, and in some ways it's the declining story of American involvement in the region.

There is another arc: the U.S. intervention in the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, the intervention in Iraq itself, and then the continuing engagement around the Gulf that today is the dominant frame for how the American public perceives U.S. engagement in the Middle East, and how many of the players see it as well. And it explains why Egypt became less relevant. Is it a story about American influence, or is it really a story about the shift of our focus and the trouble zones in the region from the peace process to the Gulf?

BRUCE RIEDEL: I am struck by a paradox. America's military footprint in the Middle East today is more widespread than it's ever been before. We now have American troops in Turkey, Iraq, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Egypt, and every Gulf state. Iran and Lebanon are the only two countries I can think of in the region where there is no American troop presence. This reinforces a point that Martin made earlier, which is that Americans are tired of it, understandably. We look to be in an ever-growing quagmire with no end in sight, involved in civil wars that no one expects to end anytime soon, and we're in the crossfire in all of them.

JEFFREY FELTMAN: The fight within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) against Qatar is an example of declining U.S. influence. Those of us that worked in the government remember the many times that we would bring together the six GCC countries for various meetings, usually with an anti-Iran focus. And it was clear that there were differences between Doha and Abu Dhabi, and between Doha and Riyadh even then. But somehow we were able to manage this. That no longer seems to be the case. The United States has not been able to help the GCC overcome this ideological difference between the Muslim Brotherhood-Qatar crowd and the anti-Muslim Brotherhood-UAE-Saudi Arabia crowd.

Another example is the negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), which contributed to not only a perception that the United States was withdrawing from the region, but also an exaggerated sense of a U.S. betrayal through the deal. And part of the outreach to Russia and others from the Gulf I think has been mostly to show the United States, "Hey, look, we can talk to others too." I don't think that anyone's under the illusion that Russia would play the same type of role in the Gulf that the United States has played for several decades. But there's a desire by the Persian Gulf nations to remind us that they're not so dependent on us, and that they can talk to others.

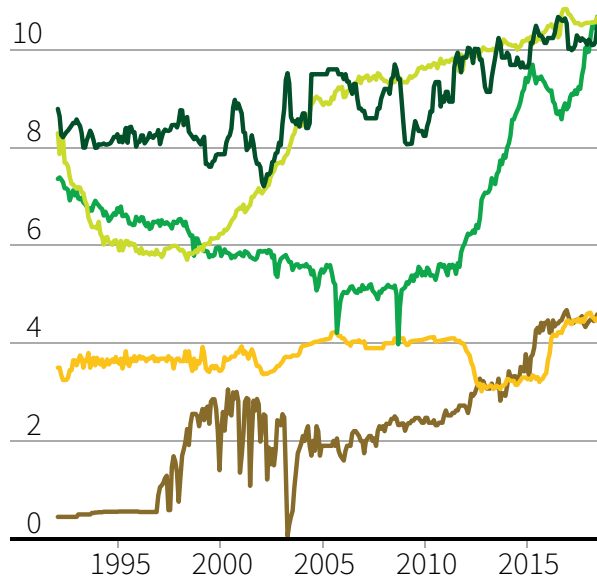
BRUCE JONES: Samantha, from your perspective, is it right to say that we are no longer dependent on the stability of oil flows out of the Middle East? It's clearly the perception, but is it true?

Crude oil production

TOP PRODUCERS

— Saudi Arabia — Russia — Iraq
 — U.S. — Iran

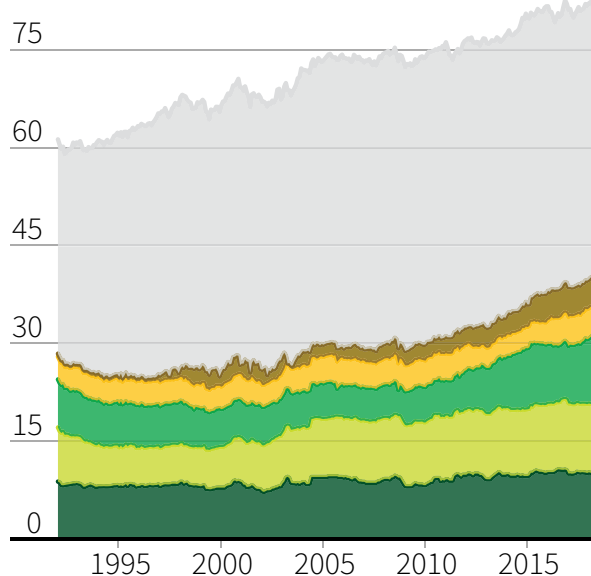
12 million barrels per day



WORLD PRODUCTION

— Saudi Arabia — Russia — Iraq
 — U.S. — Iran

90 million barrels per day



Source: Thomson Reuters Datastream

By Lea Desrayaud | REUTERS GRAPHICS

SAMANTHA GROSS: The answer to that is actually no. The United States is now a net exporter of natural gas, but we're still a significant net importer of crude oil. We're still exposed to global oil prices and we know that high gasoline prices here are incredibly politically unpopular. I think that the public believes that the government has more control over oil prices than it actually does, and that can be a real problem for the incumbent administration during times of high oil prices.

One of the biggest challenges is that the region is still important not just to our economic stability, but to global economic stability. But as United States has been marketed as a new global oil superpower, particularly by the current administration, the American public has lost its desire to take care of "our oil." The world is certainly still dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and we're still somewhat dependent on it, but we're losing our political will to take care of that in the way we used to, and it's not clear what will fill that gap.

BRUCE JONES: Well there is another actor in this region that we tend not to think about, which is Beijing. China is now the largest consumer of oil from the Middle East, has huge stakes in the flow of oil from the region, and has begun to invest in instruments that can over time build influence in the region.

But Samantha, have we reached a point where American swing production is able to compensate for some degree of instability in the global energy market? To compensate for outages in Libya or Yemen or Syria, though likely not Saudi Arabia? Is that right?

SAMANTHA GROSS: That's right. We definitely have more ability to take up slack than we used to because of the type of oil production that's happening here in the United States. The important thing about U.S. shale production is that it can respond to prices much more quickly than production that we had before, and you can see new production come on line in maybe six to nine months. That's never going to outweigh Saudi

production, where they often have spare capacity that they can turn on immediately. But it does at least dampen and reduce the duration of price shocks, though it can't eliminate all of those effects.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Still, returning to the political sensitivity of oil prices, how do you reconcile forcing Iran's oil production off the market with maintaining low domestic oil prices? Saudi Arabia has some spare capacity but they can't necessarily deploy it quickly to the market. It doesn't leave a lot of flexibility in the markets for disruptions from Nigeria, Libya, or a number of other wild cards.

SAMANTHA GROSS: Or collapsing Venezuelan production.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Right. There is an inherent paradox in the desire to have very low oil prices for domestic political purposes and a desire to use oil or oil exports as a lever for pressuring adversarial countries. You can't achieve both at the same time.

BRUCE RIEDEL: The Iran example points to another odd thing. Since 1979, no Middle Eastern country has taken oil off the market. Only the United States has taken oil off the market. It's been American sanctions against Iraq, Libya, and Iran, and now Iran again, that have reduced oil on the market. It isn't the region that's a threat to the market. If you look at the historical record of the last quarter century, it's the United States of America that's a threat to the market.

SUZANNE MALONEY: And that's a huge shift. Think of the concern well into and beyond the 1970s and 1980s about the willingness of Middle Eastern leaders to use oil as a weapon. It is the United States that has used oil as a weapon.

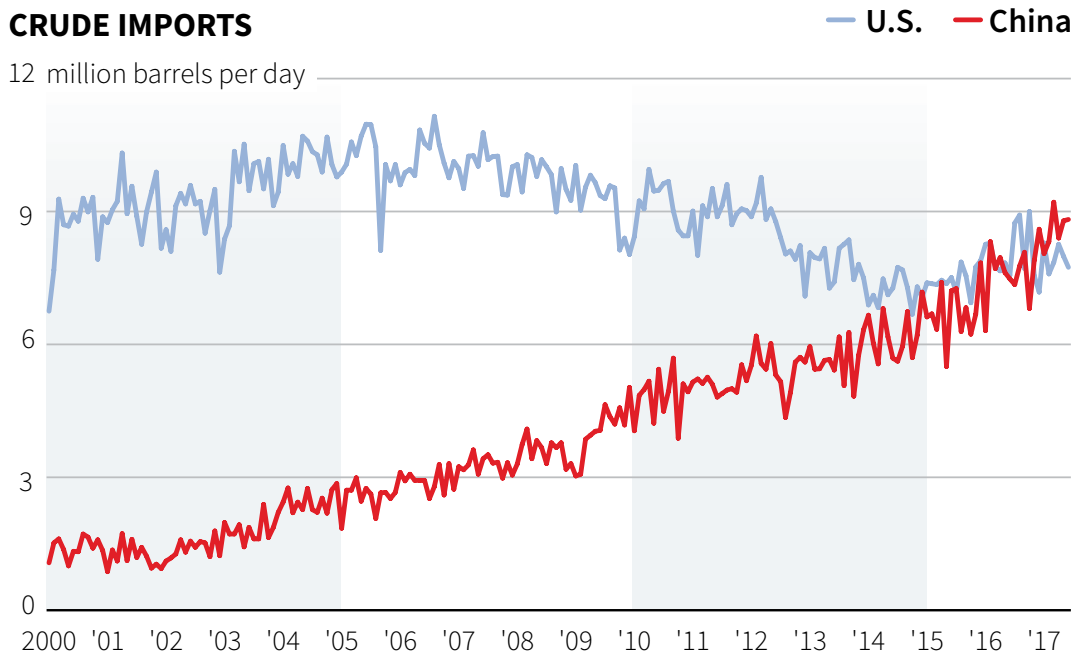
SAMANTHA GROSS: Well, the first time we did the Iran sanctions, before the JCPOA was signed, one of the reasons why the United States was able to so strongly sanction, and get the world on board with the sanctions, was because of rapidly rising U.S. oil production at the time, which really dampened the price impact. Whereas now, with things going wrong in other parts of the world and demand increasing, there isn't quite that much leeway. There seems to be this desire to have our cake and eat it too in terms of taking Iranian oil production off the market and wanting low oil prices.

BRUCE JONES: It nonetheless strikes me that, as Martin said, the perception of us being no longer dependent on Middle Eastern oil is very live. You hear that from Congress, you hear it around town. There's a clear sense of a fundamental change in the degree to which the stability of the region matters to us in terms of oil production.

MARTIN INDYK: It's more than just perception. If you look at Pentagon planning, they're no longer defining protecting the oil of the Persian Gulf as a viable strategic interest of the United States. The instruction to shift military deployments away from the Middle East to Asia is a practical consequence of this shift. Another is, as Bruce Jones mentioned, the Chinese slowly but surely recognizing that they're going to have to protect their own interests rather than be freeloaders on the United States.

China emerges as top oil importer

China has overtaken the United States as the top crude importer over the first half of 2017.



Source: EIA; China customs

Staff, 03/08/2017



III. STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND GOALS OF REGIONAL ACTORS

BRUCE JONES: Let's think about the individual actors in the Middle East, Natan's four-plus-two configuration. I want to think about each country's core strategic objectives in the region. Suzanne, what are Iran's core strategic objectives in the Middle East?

SUZANNE MALONEY: Fundamentally, Iran is driven by a desire to ensure the longevity of the regime, which is hardly surprising. Since the 1979 revolution, the Iranians have felt isolated in their region and in the world. They perceive themselves to be an embattled revolutionary state, a government that the United States and other world powers would like to eradicate if possible. And so they seek to extend their influence wherever possible.

There is an ideological dimension to it; in both the Iranian Constitution and the mindset of the leadership, the invocation to export the revolution has always been a priority. The Islamic revolution for Iranians was never intended to be a revolution in one country, it was intended and conceived of as something that would radiate throughout the Islamic world and beyond because of the anti-imperialist world view of the revolutionary leadership.

And so they have sought from the very earliest days to engage, particularly in areas of conflict, with proxies and allies—to try to provide funding to those groups that are either perceived to be extending Iran's influence or serving Iran's interest in particular arenas. The first, foremost, and still the most valuable player in the Iranian arsenal is Hezbollah, which Iran helped to forge and fund, and is now almost an autonomous subsidiary in

the sense that it is a full-fledged partner to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in many different arenas of conflict, most obviously in Syria.

The Iranians have sought to engage directly with Israel for strategic and ideological purposes. They see the Israelis as the only player that can compete with them on the regional stage. They also believe their efforts to try to engage in that conflict will help them across the Arab world. The Islamic Republic has never been terribly popular outside its own borders, but their invocation of the Palestinian cause is one way to both play to the Arab street and call out the hypocrisy of Arab governments, which have typically been quite rhetorically robust in their support for the Palestinians, but less so in terms of actually advancing the cause of independence and sovereignty.

BRUCE JONES: How would you rank Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States in terms of how Iran sees threats to itself or its goals?

SUZANNE MALONEY: Well, they're not seen as discrete threats. They're all part of a web of conspiracy against the Islamic Republic that is led by the Great Satan in the United States, exacerbated and encouraged by the Little Satan in Israel, and often implemented by the Saudis. There is a perception from Iran that the United States is using these regional actors as a way of constraining and undermining Iran. And this extends to non-state actors because to the Iranians, Sunni jihadism in the region, beginning with the Taliban and then morphing from al-Qaida to the Islamic State, has always been seen as a mechanism for advancing an American conspiracy against the Islamic Republic.

BRUCE JONES: Bruce Riedel, what is Saudi Arabia trying to achieve in the region?

BRUCE RIEDEL: I think there are four principal Saudi objectives.

The first is to counter Iran. The Saudis see Iran as their principal threat in the region, and they rapidly go from countering Iran to countering Shi'ism. This is rooted deeply in Wahhabi ideology. There's virtually no difference in their minds between the two.

The second is counter-revolution, and by that I mean countering moves toward democratic political reforms in the region, which Saudi Arabia is adamantly against. Saudi Arabia makes no secret it is an absolute monarchy and has no intention of ever becoming a democratic state.

The third is counterterrorism. Here there's a paradox of course. Saudi Arabia is determined to fight terrorist groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State, which target Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is also, because of its Wahhabi ideology, often the petri dish in which radical Islamic ideas flourish, particularly in the Muslim communities in Europe.

The fourth is to counter Israel. Although here I think there are more signs of confusion within the Kingdom than we've seen heretofore.

I make two overall comments about this. From the Saudi standpoint, many of these issues overlap. A good example is the intervention in Bahrain in 2011, which was undertaken to counter Iran, counter democratic reforms, counter Shi'ism, and, since anyone who is espousing all of those things must be a terrorist, to counter terrorism as well. They only lacked an Israeli angle. And I'm sure if they tried, they could have found one.

The other thing I would say is that when you look at issue number one—countering Iran—the sorry story for the Saudis is that they're losing, and losing badly. Lebanon and Syria were essentially lost to the Iranians in the 1980s, and the Syrian civil war has just moved them even further out of the Saudi orbit. Iraq was lost by the disastrous decision of the George W. Bush administration to intervene and then to foolishly hold elections, which guaranteed a Shiite takeover, at least from the Saudi standpoint. Yemen is a more complicated story, but the bottom line there is that the Saudis have gotten themselves into a quagmire that costs them billions of dollars a month, and costs the Iranians, at most, a couple of million dollars a month. If anyone was to look at this as a corporate entity, they would say this is a disastrous decision for you to make.

Which gets me to my last point. Saudi Arabia may have more aspirations for regional leadership today than it has ever had. Witness that they just signed a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in Saudi Arabia, and brought in Djibouti as well. The prime minister of Pakistan made his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia, and President Trump made his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia. Yet while the Saudis are definitely very active diplomatically, questions about the stability of the Kingdom are higher now than they've been in 50 years. And there is a very serious question about what the line of succession is going to produce, and whether it will be disrupted by some kind of internal political upheaval. It is very fascinating that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has spent the last four months sleeping every night on a yacht off Jeddah in the Red Sea because he doesn't feel safe sleeping on the ground.

JEFFREY FELTMAN: When the crown prince is floating on his yacht in the Red Sea, he must also be thinking about the economic and financial future of Saudi Arabia, not just counter-revolution in the region. Unlike the United Arab Emirates or Qatar or even Kuwait, Saudi Arabia lacks the long-term comfort level of having used its energy resources to build up sizable financial reserves. So he must also be looking at the economic situation, which would explain the Ritz Carlton shakedown with some of the businesses.

BRUCE JONES: Let's turn to Turkey. It seems to me that a central and surely driving concern of Turkish engagement in the Middle East is its internal politics, including the role of President Erdoğan and a repositioning of Turkish domestic politics toward Islam. Kemal and Amanda, what are Turkey's strategic objectives in the Middle East?

KEMAL KIRIŞCI: First of all, it's Erdoğan's strategy, not Turkey's. The easiest way to capture his strategic perspective is reflected by two different hand gestures he frequently employs. From about 2012 to about nine or ten months ago, Erdoğan's strategic perspective on the Middle East was symbolized by the four-finger Rabiya salute, denoting solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood. From this you can deduce the poor relations with Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, the close relations with Qatar, and Turkey's ambiguous, confusing policies over Libya.

But during the run up to the presidential elections in June 2018 he raised his other hand too in a four-finger salute, denoting "one state, one nation, one flag, one language." This is Turkish nationalism pure and simple. And that helped him win the elections with 52 percent of the vote by receiving a substantial part of the nationalist votes. So his strategic perspective now is a very confusing and conflicting one because voices captured by the nationalist four finger hand sign are openly telling him that he has to build bridges with Bashar Assad and pre-empt the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous entity in northern Syria and ensure the return of at least some of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees. And that a huge economy like Egypt cannot be ignored. And to get on with Israel and the United States. So in a nutshell, I think we're seeing a tug of war in Turkey's strategic perspectives between two very separate constituencies that have coalesced under these two hand gestures.

AMANDA SLOAT: I would add that former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu developed a policy of "zero problems with neighbors," which stemmed from a desire to re-engage with the Arab world. This approach foundered during the Arab Spring, especially as Erdoğan's support for Islamic opposition groups against regimes with whom he previously had friendly relations didn't turn out so well—particularly in Egypt and Syria. Turkey has also suffered from instability on its borders given the fighting in Iraq and Syria, including large-scale terrorist attacks and massive refugee flows. As Kemal said, this has complicated Turkey's regional position.

BRUCE JONES: Let's move south. Natan, what are Israel's strategic objectives in the region?

NATAN SACHS: I think there are just three strategic interests, and then a fourth outcome of them.

The first strategic interest is itself often described as threefold: Iran, Iran, and Iran. This is the Israeli focus on countering Iran and Iranian influence in a variety of different realms. The nuclear realm, which still underlies a lot of what Israel thinks about, and is in some ways the only existential threat that the Israelis, especially Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, identify on the horizon. Countering Hezbollah, Iran's main proxy, as Suzanne described it, and the main conventional military threat that the Israelis identify—it's not the Egyptian military

or the Syrian military, as in the past—Hezbollah is the one the planners are really concerned about. Israel's military planners are actively preparing to counter Hezbollah's rocket arsenal or an attack targeting the Galilee. The third realm of Iranian influence is Syria and Iran's military presence there. This is another major concern for the Israelis. As a byproduct, Israel has invested in its relationship with Russia, now a very important focal point and an important Israeli interest, as we saw recently in the headlines.³

The second strategic interest—a long-standing one—is maintaining quiet on its borders and counterterrorism more broadly. Hezbollah is central to that, Hamas is secondary, and terrorists from other Palestinian groups are always part of the equation. On this topic, I think the Israelis fundamentally view themselves as doing well, at least among Netanyahu and his camp.

The third strategic interest is managing the Palestinian question and the diplomatic aspects of it: reducing pressure, avoiding risks, making sure that no big asks come from the United States. In fact, with Trump, they are even making gains thus far, from their perspective.

The outcome of these three strategic interests is what I've called elsewhere an anti-solutionist approach.⁴ They don't try to reshape or solve the fundamental problems. They don't think Iran is going to change because of an agreement, unless Iran itself changes. They don't think that the Palestinian conflict will be solved because of any document. They think that what they need is a conservative approach to managing problems, getting wealthier and stronger in the meantime. They try to build on progress with Sunni states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt, and strengthen Israeli military power, counterterrorism capabilities, intelligence cooperation, and economic prowess. Israel also fosters economic and military ties to Asia, working strategically with India, China, Japan, and South Korea to promote good relations with all actors. All this, without trying to transform the core issues: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the rivalry with Iran.

So overall, Israel's strategic priorities are to contain the threats, play defense, and capitalize on what it sees as a good trend despite the major problems, albeit with grave concern about Iran in the context of both Syria and Hezbollah.

BRUCE JONES: Looking at Russia, you can see a number of different strategic objectives at play. Some of them are in slight contradiction to one another, as is true of everybody.

First, Russia believes in the importance of states. Russia has a profound aversion to seeing non-state actors gaining traction and a desire to sustain the stability of states as a bulwark of order in the narrowest possible sense of that term, without any concern about the quality of the oppression that goes along with that order.

Clearly a second factor is wrong-footing the United States, using whatever mistakes we made and throwing our weight against us, and filling in spaces that we leave and demonstrating that we are weak in the region, really playing up that aspect.

Third, it's an opportunity for them to test and showcase strategic weapons systems. Some of that's turned out to be a bit of a mistake—it turns out that some of those weapons systems are not nearly as sophisticated as people had thought. It's quite striking if you go back to the early Obama phase and this deep concern about using American air power in Syria amid Russian missile defense systems, those systems turned out to be extremely easy to avoid and to work around, which probably isn't quite what Russia intended to showcase. But nonetheless, Moscow was demonstrating military muscle and using that to not only sell weapons but also more importantly to build relations with key actors in the region. And interestingly, while an important theme has been Russia's effort to build closer ties to Tehran, Moscow is just as invested in building ties to the Sunni states in the region and to Israel. And I can't quite piece together how Russia perceives that dynamic, but maybe it comes back to the first point that stable states in the region are paramount.

3 David M. Halbfinger and Andrew Higgins, "Putin calls downing of Russian plane in Syria 'tragic' and absolves Israel," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/world/middleeast/syria-russian-plane.html>.

4 Natan Sachs, "Why Israel waits: Anti-solutionism as a strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-10-20/why-israel-waits>.

Cutting against all of this is the fact that Russia benefits from high oil prices. I don't think that Russia goes out of its way to produce instability vis-à-vis the impact on oil prices, but instability that drives oil prices up is not something they have to worry about.

And then there's the kind of strange Erdoğan-Putin dynamic, which has been very tense at times, then an effort at rapprochement. I don't know exactly what we'd say about where we are right now.



President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hassan Rouhani of Iran and Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey attend a news conference following their meeting in Tehran, Iran September 7, 2018. Kirill Kudryavtsev/Pool via REUTERS

AMANDA SLOAT: Turkey and Russia have a complicated relationship. Nowhere is this illustrated more clearly than in Syria, where they are on different sides of the conflict with Putin backing the Assad regime and Erdoğan supporting the opposition. Their relations hit a low point in November 2015 when Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet for violating its airspace. Erdoğan remarkably apologized to Putin seven months later, after suffering from painful economic sanctions and more importantly given Ankara's need for Moscow's acquiescence to a Turkish military operation to prevent the Syrian Kurds from creating a contiguous region alongside its border. A major crisis was averted recently in Idlib, as Turkey and Russia agreed to enforce a new demilitarized zone, but tensions could easily flare up again.

MARTIN INDYK: In contrast with the United States' withdrawal, Putin is engaged in a very deliberate effort to fill any resulting gaps, starting with Syria, even if it was never of great strategic importance to the United States. The Russians were able to use a military presence there to gain outsized influence across the region precisely because of its military engagement at a time when the United States is withdrawing militarily. At least that's the perception.

Interestingly, Putin contends to have a diplomatic role as well. Little noticed in the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki was Putin's reference not only to the Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement of 1974 in which the Soviet Union and the United States played important roles, as a way of re-invoking that to re-legitimize the Assad regime, but also U.N. Security Council Resolution 338, which was the U.S.-Soviet sponsored resolution that ended the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This was not coincidental. Now that Putin is building a strong influential relationship with Israel, I believe that he will seek to use it first to try to reconcile between Assad and Israel—good luck with that—and then we'll see him move on to trying to play a role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where we have failed to do so.

ANGELA STENT: Russia's return to the Middle East after the withdrawal from the region that followed the Soviet collapse is one of Putin's major foreign policy achievements. Unlike in Soviet times, Russian policy is pragmatic and non-ideological, which gives it considerable flexibility. Russia has ties with all the major regional players, irrespective of their internal politics. Indeed, Russia is the only major power that talks to the Shiite states, the Sunni states, and to Israel. It has been able to establish cooperative ties with the region's main protagonists and antagonists: Israel and the Palestinians; Israel and Iran; Iran and Saudi Arabia; Turkey and the Kurds; both Libyan governments; and Hamas and Hezbollah. Putin has taken advantage of the U.S. ambivalence about its future role in the region to re-assert Russia's influence there. Indeed, Russia has begun to replace the United States as the go-to player in this fractured region. Its intervention in Syria and support for Assad have enabled Putin to achieve one of his major goals—Russia's return to the global board of directors. Russia is in the Middle East for the long haul. It is seeking to convert its decisive role in Syria—ensuring that Assad prevailed and stayed in power—to a broader role of regional power broker. But there is also a domestic element here. Russia has an ongoing problem with radicalization and jihadism amongst its Muslim population—20 million and growing. The Kremlin viewed the Arab Spring, particularly what happened in Libya, as a dangerous precedent for what could happen elsewhere—including in Russia. Putin has given the figure of 4,000 people who have gone from Russia to fight with ISIS. Russia wants to ensure that these jihadists do not return home and it seeks to minimize the ability of foreign terrorist groups to radicalize Russian citizens.

Since Putin came to power, Russia has developed close ties with two countries that were shunned in the Soviet times—Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the Israeli case, the driving factors are Iran and domestic politics. Netanyahu depends on Russia to restrain Hezbollah's activities in the Golan Heights and 1.4 million Israeli citizens come from the former Soviet space and retain links with Russia and its neighbors. In the Saudi case, the driving factors are Iran and oil. Like the Israelis, the Saudis seek Russian help in containing Iran. And the two countries are cooperating on restricting oil production to maintain higher prices. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia—like the Trump administration—hope that Russia will curtail Iran's role in Syria once the war is over. But that overestimates Russia's influence over Iran. Russia will remain in Syria once the war is over and is actively seeking Western help in its reconstruction. But Putin has said that Iran will remain in Syria. However, the Russian-Iranian relationship could become more conflictual once the war is over.

BRUCE JONES: When I was serving for the United Nations, we created the Middle East Quartet. And in the initial version of that, people may or may not be aware, there was no role for Russia. It wasn't a four, it was a three. But Secretary General Kofi Annan very much wanted the Russians in—that was part of the United Nations dynamic. Even then, Russia had a clear interest to deal themselves a card back into the Middle East peace process, back into the diplomatic table, even though they didn't really have any power within that framework. But that gave them a seat at the table and that seemed to satisfy them at that stage. Clearly it no longer satisfies them to just have a seat at an American table, they want their own table and they want to play a role.

Earlier, we talked about four-plus-two-plus-one. Egypt has been in the past a major player in the region, and may be again. Egypt remains a consequential actress. Tamara, what is Egypt's strategic outlook on the region now?

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES: Traditionally, the United States has relied on Egypt as a backstop in the region with additional diplomatic capacity, as the largest Arab state, as the leader in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, and as the country closest to the United States in that period that Martin was describing earlier. Today, Egypt cannot play that role. It simply doesn't have the capacity. There's a gaping strategic hole where Cairo used to be.

Egypt today has reverted to a military-backed dictatorship, which is what it's been for most of its modern history. But this military-backed dictatorship is exhibiting levels of repression far greater than under Gamal Abdel Nasser. They essentially want a public sphere with no room for religion outside a little bit deployed by the state on its own behalf, and no room for independent politics. They've waged an all-out war against political dissent inside the country. They have a tame parliament of regime loyalists that sort of compete against one another to support the will of the executive.

Yet the challenges that undermined Hosni Mubarak and produced the revolution of 2011 are still there: corruption, inequality, failing government services in health care and education, a large cohort of young adults whose aspirations simply cannot be realized in the current environment or with the current political economy, a military that controls at least a third of the economy, and in fact under Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi is probably growing its share of the economy. Egypt remains very fragile and its leadership is very aware of that. Since Sissi came to power in the summer of 2013, they have been dependent for their survival on regular financial supplements from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which is very irksome for a country with a 5,000-year history and whose modern existence is predicated on its independence.

Thus Sissi is trying to balance between his inevitable economic dependence on the Gulf states and his desire to exhibit Egypt's traditional independence in regional and global affairs. You see that in Syria, where Egypt separated itself from the very strong anti-Assad view in much of the Arab world and formed this quiet little coalition with the Jordanians and Emiratis to slow down the rush to push Assad out of power.

You also see it with the Palestinian file, both because of Egypt's border with Gaza and its concern over training and material support from Gaza to the terrorist insurgency by an ISIS chapter in Sinai. In fact, if you look at the most recent round of major violence between Israel and Hamas in 2014, Sissi really was against a cease-fire until the domestic political pressure became too intense because of the humanitarian effect of the war on Palestinians in Gaza. The Palestinian issue remains a place where the Egyptians have unique leverage and unique interests. And so that may be one arena in which the United States and others can still engage with them.

MARTIN INDYK: Egypt also has an independent policy when it comes to Iran. They're not engaged militarily in Yemen. They are not prepared to join in an anti-Iranian coalition with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States. Iran is an independent state that they pretend to have normal relations with.

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES: Yes, which is fascinating given the Iranian lionization of Anwar Sadat's assassin. Both sides seem to have gotten over that very bad blood. I think that this goes back to Egypt's concern for states. It sees the region collapsing around it, and it cares about preserving the states that are there. And whatever else you say about Iran, it is a strong state. And it also speaks to the pragmatism from Iran, because the power transfer from Mohammed Morsi to Sissi didn't really impede Iran's efforts to try to improve the relationship with Egypt. That has been a slow-moving project since at least the 1990s.

JEFFREY FELTMAN: Egypt also plays an important role in Libya. Libya's a little bit away from our discussion, but the Egyptians have done a fairly good job of bringing together representatives of fighting forces from across the country. Egypt doesn't want to see the Muslim Brotherhood take over all of Libya, but Egypt also has a very strong interest in Libya's stability. A million Egyptians traditionally work in Libya. It's a national security and economic interest for Egypt. And they have played probably the most significant role of any of the outsiders after 2012 in Libya.

BRUCE JONES: Bruce Riedel suggested earlier that the United Arab Emirates could count as a "half" in the regional formula. What are the strategic objectives of the United Arab Emirates in the region?

JEFFREY FELTMAN: The United Arab Emirates play a very significant role in defining the politics of the Persian Gulf. Their strategic goals are counter-revolution, counter-Muslim Brotherhood, protection of the Emirati government system, and crucially, stability in Saudi Arabia. The United Arab Emirates have become extremely concerned about the stability of Saudi Arabia, see Mohammed bin Salman as the key to Saudi stability, and have invested in his success. The participation of the United Arab Emirates in the Yemen war is largely because of Saudi Arabia. As I understand it, the diplomacy of the Horn of Africa was mostly done by Abu Dhabi, but the ceremony was in Saudi Arabia. This shows the influence of Abu Dhabi but also shows that Abu Dhabi wants to play up the stability and leadership role of Saudi Arabia.

It's worth thinking about the relationship between Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, and Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. The fight with Qatar was born more in Abu Dhabi than in Riyadh, and it was used to help elevate Mohammed bin Salman into his current position perhaps earlier than might have otherwise happened. It became a tool by which Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince because his predecessor Muhammad bin Nayef was accused of being too pro-Qatar, too indulgent of Qatar's Muslim Brotherhood sympathies. I think Mohammed bin Salman probably feels a certain loyalty to Mohammed bin Zayed over how he became crown prince and why.

BRUCE JONES: Jordan always comes up as the last remaining island of stability. Yet we haven't really mentioned it once so far. How much does Jordan actually matter to the region?

NATAN SACHS: Jordan is a very close partner of the United States, of Israel—mostly quietly—and of the Gulf, although it has strains in those relationships too. It's relevant certainly in the Palestinian case, but at the end of the day, it's not a major mover of events, it's mostly moved by them. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States care tremendously for Jordan's stability, as they should. But the overriding concern for many is threats to Jordan. It's not primarily about Jordanian influence, beyond some issues like Southern Syria or the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

I would also give the Jordanians great credit on the humanitarian side, and Turkey and Lebanon also deserve this. This is the third major historic wave of refugees for Jordan. They've received an enormous number of Syrian refugees, and that's after the Iraqis and after the Palestinians.

AMANDA SLOAT: I want to reinforce that point on Turkey. For all the criticism that we level against Ankara, the Turks have not gotten sufficient credit for their extraordinary efforts to manage a complex humanitarian challenge. A population of 80 million people is currently hosting over 3.5 million refugees.

BRUCE RIEDEL: I think of Jordan as the shock absorber of the Middle East. Whenever there is a dramatic new conflict, whether it's Iraq in 2003, or Iraq and Kuwait in 1990, or the Syrian civil war, or troubles on the West Bank, Jordan is the place that takes in the exiles, and in a way takes some pressure out of the system. The problem is, and Natan rightly put it, we've now asked them to do this three times in a row, and I think there is less and less grounds for stability in Jordan. If I were to say, "what's the unknown event in the next five to 10 years that could dramatically change the Middle East?" it would be the downfall of the Hashemite monarchy. And I don't think it's any longer out of the question.

MARTIN INDYK: There's one counter to that, although I think that's a wise word of caution. It's that the United States, Israel and, reluctantly, Saudi Arabia, all have a stake in Jordanian stability.

NATAN SACHS: I would say "stake" is an understatement.

IV. KEY INTERACTIONS OF MAJOR POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BRUCE JONES: Let's turn to the dynamics amongst these actors, as well as the conflicts in which this is playing out in the form of proxy warfare or competitive mediation. As a superficial observer, you get two depictions. One is Game of Thrones, everybody's playing statecraft against everyone, a free-for-all. The second is this sense of a Turkey-Iran-Qatar axis arrayed against a U.S.-Israel-Saudi-UAE axis. Both of those depictions strike me as oversimplified. So let's try to unpack some of it.

Let's first think about what is the texture of the relationship now between the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the Iran question. How solid is that sense of three key actors who have a primary concern? Is that trumping the other dynamics, the other tensions? How solid is that line of strategic alignment?

MARTIN INDYK: It's solid in terms of the common interest. But one has to take into account America's withdrawal from the region. If the United States is going to shift from playing a leading role to a supporting role, then the effectiveness of such a coalition is dramatically reduced.

Now the United States is applying sanctions pressure against Iran, which tends to make up for it. But in the region itself, when it comes to countering Iran's destabilizing efforts, the United States is not playing a leading role there, it's leaving Saudi Arabia and Israel to their own devices. But as Bruce Riedel said, Saudi Arabia cannot win against Iran in Yemen. Nor can Israel succeed in its objective of pushing Iran out of Syria. The willingness of the United States to play the leading role could have made the difference in terms of countering Iran in the region.

NATAN SACHS: I partially disagree on this point. Yes, the force projection capacity of the Saudis and Emiratis is quite limited. But the Israelis, at least in Syria, feel that they can take care of themselves, albeit using American arms and with some Russian acquiescence. Israel has graduated to a certain degree. They're not going to kick Iran entirely out of Syria, but they have a strong, perhaps even exaggerated, perception of their own capacity in Syria. Mind you, the last thing they want to do is underestimate the Iranians. The Iranians will come back at them at some point.

Still, I would say they feel that at least in Syria they are quite capable, and they don't necessarily think that the United States entering Syria would solve the Iran problem. I've heard—a while ago—very senior Israelis saying that what they would really want is an effective Russian-U.S. understanding in Syria, but one that would take their interests into account. This is the big question, whether that could happen.

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES: Let me start by pivoting off a point that I think Bruce and Natan were both getting at in a way: in different ways, Saudi Arabia and Israel can act with a lot of capacity in the region, but it's capacity that's limited to certain dimensions. Israel has a lot of military and intelligence capability, but its diplomatic engagement with the rest of the region is constrained. Saudi Arabia has a lot of soft power, it's got a lot of money, it's got a lot of convening power, but it doesn't have military power.

And in different ways each of those capitals has traditionally relied on the United States to backstop its constrained capacity in those other dimensions. And one of the challenges for the region right now, and for those two actors, is that they're not sure whether they can rely on Washington to backstop them in that traditional way.

BRUCE JONES: Natan, while rapprochement is too strong of a term, we've observed significant easing of the rhetoric between Israel and Saudi Arabia. How does this look from Israel? Is there a sense of Saudi Arabia as a potential partner, or is it just opportunistic cooperation with a diminished threat?

NATAN SACHS: It's mostly opportunistic, but the change is pretty dramatic. It's not just rhetoric, you can see it in internal communications and curricula in Saudi Arabia, which for Israel is a very real and important thing, and even closer relations with the Emiratis. Still, I don't think anyone has any grand illusions about a great love affair. Israel is sort of the mistress of the Middle East where everyone wants to be with it but no one wants to admit it, at least thus far. This could change, though, as so much has recently.

But I think for Netanyahu and for others, there's a very strong sense that this is a product of Israeli strength. Netanyahu recently changed course and has spoken of strategic long-term growth in military expenditure by Israel, even as a percentage of GDP. This is a dramatic change for Netanyahu, ideologically, from an economic standpoint—he's the real economic neo-liberal and fiscal hawk of Israel. And part of the rationale is that military strength is key to why they have gained diplomatically with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and even as far afield as India.

Of course, there is a ceiling to all this, and it's Arab public opinion. At the end of the day, Saudi Arabia is an Arab country and the public opinion is not going to shift on a dime. And in Egypt, public opinion is vociferously anti-Israeli, even with the peace treaty, and that's not going to change. Still, the change is real.

BRUCE JONES: Bruce Riedel, how is this axis perceived in Riyadh?

BRUCE RIEDEL: First of all, Saudi-Israeli clandestine cooperation is nothing new, it goes back to the 1960s. In fact, in the 1960s, it was much more important than it is today in working against Nasser and Nasserism. There was a break in that cooperation around the 1973 war, but it's more or less been in existence ever since then.

I agree with Natan, there's a much closer relationship between the Israelis and the Emiratis than with the Saudis. If you go to Abu Dhabi, you can see it in the kind of equipment their security services use. You don't see anything like that in Saudi Arabia.

I think from the Saudi standpoint, Israel's important in one respect. And that is the road to Washington goes through Jerusalem, and the Saudis know that. To get a lot of things they want out of the Americans, they want to make sure the Israelis are on the same page as they are. And the Iran nuclear program was one of those. Other than that, it's kind of useless. Israel has no influence in Iraq, Yemen, or Lebanon. One place it still has influence, kind of a negative influence, is in Syria. But if I were going to bet on the long term, I think the Iranians are going to be in a much stronger position in Syria than the Russians or the Israelis. Partly because they're prepared to put lots of boots on the ground, and no one else is prepared to do that.

So from the Saudi perspective, clandestine cooperation is fine but that's as far as it can go. And we saw that very vividly demonstrated this spring, when the United States moved its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and King Salman responded by taking an Arab summit in Dhahran and renaming it the "Jerusalem Summit," effectively issuing a very public rebuke to the crown prince. It was also a signal to the crown prince that not only is daddy not happy with what you're doing here, but the clerical establishment and the royal family are not happy, and you're exposing your vulnerability here when you least want to do it. And, don't be seen as an Israeli lackey because that really will do you in in Saudi politics in the long term.

NATAN SACHS: I think it's also important how Israel and Saudi Arabia perceive Trump. Many Israelis were baffled by his candidacy, but very quickly, Netanyahu and his ambassador understood they had to embrace the administration very closely, and they've been extremely successful. Because of all the decisions that came after—including Jerusalem—Trump is now very popular among Israelis. When the Bob Woodward book came out with all the tidbits about Trump's conduct, the headline for some Israelis was "Trump considered killing Assad." In the Israeli context, that's a positive headline. Here is an administration that actually might take seriously and speak to the Middle East in Middle Eastern terms, in contrast to Obama. The Israelis, just like the Saudis, saw the previous president as "no drama Obama," aloof to his friends and enemies. And here comes all-drama Trump, who's completely on your side and goes overboard in superlatives. Of course, there is always concern over actions matching rhetoric, but Israelis don't necessarily care about that as much. They want the top-line position of the United States on Iran, on the JCPOA, and on the hope for Iranian (internal) regime change to be there.

One last thing here. Israel and Saudi Arabia recognize that there are two different impulses that seem to be driving Trump. On the one hand, "I don't want to get involved in the Middle East, why should I pay for that?" But on the other hand there's a very strong sense that "I will never appear weak," which is why he probably wanted to consider killing Assad. And that impulse of "I will never appear weak" appeals very much to Trump's friends in the region because they think that's exactly how the Middle East operates. If he's not willing to appear weak and he's my friend, fantastic.

BRUCE RIEDEL: It's interesting, the Saudis made a huge investment in Donald Trump. To them, Donald Trump is the anti-Obama. We've been saying the perception is that the United States has left. Saudi Arabia's perception is that the United States is back, Trump's our guy, he's going to take on the Iranians, and he's going to fix Syria! I'm beginning to see, in the Saudi press, doubt being raised about all of that, first on the Palestinian issue.



U.S. President Donald Trump welcomes Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, U.S. March 20, 2018. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

BRUCE JONES: I've been struck by how key Arab diplomats in Washington and internationally have been going out of their way to stress, which they didn't previously, how much it still matters that the United States take the Palestinian issue seriously. It's changed the tone and the messages they are presenting to Washington: you must still pay attention to this if you want to preserve the kind of relationships that you've built with us.

NATAN SACHS: And since then the United States has gone four degrees in the Israeli direction.

BRUCE RIEDEL: But bigger than the Palestinian context, there are more and more articles in the Saudi press saying that "Mueller can't take down Trump." The denial that he's in trouble is the clearest reflection that they now realize there is real trouble for this president, which of course then leads them to Mike Pence. And if there are troubling aspects about Donald Trump's behavior in the Middle East, to Saudis and other Arabs, Mike Pence is a nightmare come true because he'll do anything to fulfill what evangelical Americans want Israel to be. I think there's nervousness now about what comes after Trump. And if they were more sophisticated they'd also be thinking, "What have we done to our relationship with the Democrats?" It may be very, very hard to rebuild if you get a Democratic president in the future.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Is there a recognition among the Saudis that irrespective of Mueller or who controls the White House, there's no appetite among the American people for an expanded military footprint or human commitment to the Middle East?

BRUCE RIEDEL: The Saudis aren't looking for the United States to counter Iran on each of the battlefields, they're looking for the United States to depose the regime in Tehran, not by trying to fight it in Hodeidah and Idlib, where you're playing into Iran's advantage. That may be delusional, but I think that's what their hope is.

MARTIN INDYK: Just like we did in Iraq.

BRUCE JONES: But does that necessarily, in their mind, involve American military action or are they sympathetic to what appears to be a pretty strong effort by this administration to use a variety of economic tools to achieve something like that result?

BRUCE RIEDEL: I don't think they want a war. That would be extremely damaging because they know the Iranians would fight a war by attacking Saudi and Kuwaiti oil installations. I think that they hope that the United States, through a combination of economic measures and especially covert action, is going to bring about a regime change. They have, like the Trump administration, delusions about the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq dissident group as an instrument of change, and delusions that Baluchis are ready to rise up, and Khuzestan is ready to rise up. I would defer to Suzanne, but I think all of this is fantasy.

But I think it's a fantasy that is enjoyed in Saudi Arabia. There's a video that is absolutely stunning that was put out by Mohammed bin Salman that shows Iran attacking Saudi patrol boats in the Persian Gulf, then Saudi Arabia landing the Royal Marines on the Iranian coast and marching to Tehran.⁵ And the video ends with crowds chanting Mohammed bin Salman's name in Tehran as he arrives at the head of the Panzer Division and liberates the Iranian people. When it came out in the Gulf it went viral, for understandable reasons.

BRUCE JONES: Let's shift and look at the other putative axis here, the Turkey-Iran-Qatar line. It was a pretty striking development when the blockade was imposed on Qatar that Turkey deployed additional troops to Qatar. Is this just tactical, just a marriage of convenience, just actors who have bigger problems and are banding together to push back? Is there depth to these relationships?

KEMAL KIRIŞCI: Erdoğan has an ideological common denominator with Qatar, though there is also a suspected element of cronyism and corruption. In Turkey there's a lot of speculation on the part of those who are not happy with Erdoğan, that Qatar is for him what Switzerland used to be for many world leaders.

Iran's role is a very different one. For both the traditional Turkish state and Erdoğan's Turkey, Iran is an important state for historical reasons. Iran is a huge market awaiting to discover Turkish products, and it's always been of significance. And that determines a lot of the foreign policy that Turkey has with other players, including the United States, and including the sanctions issue.

Regarding the military deployment to Qatar, they are also present in Djibouti, where the Ottomans also used to exist a long time ago. This is a way for Erdoğan to curry favor with the Turkish military. And it's a very interesting development that has to do with Syria too. The Turkish military, traditionally it was engrained in their genes that you did not step across Turkish borders into other lands unless it was under the United Nations Security Council, or into Northern Iraq or Cyprus. And Erdoğan got them to do that, and in return now there's talk about the prestige of being a world power. It's packaged in that nationalist state element, which contradicts pan-Islamism. It's a trap, that's how I see it.

MARTIN INDYK: Between Turkey and Qatar, it's definitely ideological. But for both of them it's also strategic. Qatar was saved from what appears now to have been a Saudi-Emirati intervention. And from Turkey's point of view, they've managed to position themselves in a way that thwarts the ambitions of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, making them a player in the region.

With Iran, from the Qatari-Turkish point of view, it's all tactical. It's not a strategic alliance. Bottom line, the Qataris fear the Iranians more than they're attracted to them. They are now dependent on Iran for supplies because their only air corridor is over Iran. They share a gas field with Iran, so they've always been very careful. They're very conscious of the fact that the Iranians have told them time and time again, "If we get into a conflict with the United States and its Arab partners, we're coming for you first." I don't think Qatar has any illusions about Iran's ambition in the region when it comes to this tiny little place with 200,000 citizens with the largest gas reserves in the world that happen to be adjacent to the Iranian gas fields.

NATAN SACHS: I'm not sure this is a camp. Really there's two Sunni camps, and the mistake of one of the Sunni camps is that the blockade on Qatar helped cement that break. But Iran is really its own player, it's tactically using things. Only Syria (Assad) is really in its camp.

5 "Saudi deterrent force," December 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9selhGBPdek>.

BRUCE JONES: I want to shift gears to proxy conflicts. If you look across the region, you have proxy conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. But we can go further. Looking at the dynamics in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia, several of our actors are present—the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey.

Jeff, you were the U.S. ambassador in Lebanon at the time when a very different kind of proxy dynamics were in play and you've been helping to mediate some of these conflicts. Is the proxy dynamic simply an element of the new geopolitics of the region?

JEFFREY FELTMAN: I think that's an element of it, and it helped provide ammunition, literally, to fuel these wars. But I think that most of these conflicts are more than simply proxy fights.

In Libya, while the outsiders have ideological interests, internal parties fight over resources. Yes, the United Arab Emirates has certain ideological interests in what a central government in Tripoli would look like, and Qatar and Turkey have an opposite view. But the Libyans are fighting over the resources of the state. They're fighting over who has the power to decide how that pot of gold is going to be divided. So it's completely different internally and externally.

On Hezbollah, I think that the Saudis and others haven't really studied the history or drawn the right lessons learned. The Iranians were able to exploit, using resources, ideology, and revolutionary fervor, the fact that the Lebanese Shiites had been marginalized and almost disenfranchised by the Maronite and Sunni elite. Iran was able to create Hezbollah with deep local roots. It obviously has Iran's interest, and is the force multiplier for Iranian revolutionary interests.

So you look at the Houthis, who are not Hezbollah and not part of Iran, Inc. But without question, Iranian influence in Yemen is deeper now than it was before the war started. The Houthi military sophistication is greater, and use of military technology is greater. The war is making the Houthis closer to a Hezbollah-type organization than they were before. The Houthis are not inherently a subset of Iran, but the proxy part of this is created in reaction to the war.

And it's interesting because I think it's an example of decisions that Mohammed bin Salman has made that had the opposite result of what was intended. The Iranian influence in Yemen is greater now than it was before the war. Qatar's relationship with Turkey is stronger than it was before the boycott. So I think that the Saudi decisionmaking is often producing the results that were least intended.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Of all the proxy wars, the real prize is Iraq. That's where the oil is, that's where the natural gas is, that's where there's a population that's large enough to be significant. As I said earlier, Iraq will come back at some point. Will it come back as an Iranian puppet? Probably not. Will it come back as an Iranian ally? There's probably a good chance of that. The Iranians benefited enormously from our decision to go into Iraq, and their proxies there are getting stronger and stronger. There is resentment against Iranians, seen clearly in Basra recently, but I think the overall tilt is toward Iran. The Iranians have to play this very carefully, not overplay their hand. They're pretty skilled at this game though. They've learned over the years how to play it very well.

Despite all the disastrous decisions in Yemen, Qatar, Libya, and other places, the place where Saudi Arabia was said to be playing a smart role is in Iraq. I wonder if that has now backfired. Part of the reason we see the Iranians and Iranian protégés in Iraq playing tougher ball is because the minute they began to see that the Saudis wanted to play, they said, "Okay, we can't let that happen, we're going to whack them back down." That's the proxy war that I think we really should keep our eyes on the most.

MARTIN INDYK: I don't know whether you referred to the United States in the context of proxy wars, but the United States is essentially using Saudi Arabia, Israel, and to a lesser extent Egypt, as proxies for American influence in the region. This demonstrates that the absence of U.S. diplomatic initiative in all of these areas results in our dependence on these local actors, and we're unable to achieve the objectives that we share with them.

SUZANNE MALONEY: That's been the case since the Nixon doctrine. This entire conceptualization of how the United States would assert power in the Middle East has always been, if not entirely reliant, at least primarily contingent upon local regional states that were close partners, in most cases not allies, through which we exerted influence and were always to some extent distorted through that relationship. What is different—or perhaps what's notable—is that it's not just the Iranians that use proxies, it's also the United States. We're spending a billion dollars a year in Syria. This idea that we weren't present in Syria is simply untrue. We may not have been able to produce the outcome we wanted, but the idea that we were a completely missing actor in the evolution of that conflict is one of the most dangerous myths about the Obama administration's approach to that conflict.

It's also important to appreciate how all of these actors, including Iran, are shaping their responses based on an American state that has been, through several administrations, erratic, unpredictable, and in many ways destructive. We're always talking about Iran's destabilizing activities. The reality is that the greatest destabilization in the Middle East in the past 20 years has been the United States' decision to invade Iraq and its subsequent failure to appreciate how regional actors would respond. It's not an absolution for how Iranians have sought to assert themselves through violence and groups that are prone to trying to destroy rather than to build. But fundamentally, if you remove that episode, then I think you have a very different set of dynamics in the region today. We seem unwilling to recognize that our role in these ongoing conflicts is enormous.

MARTIN INDYK: I agree with that, but I don't agree with your point that it's been the same way since the Nixon doctrine. The idea that we should rely on our regional allies and partners has been consistent. But in previous times, we were much more effectively engaged diplomatically than we have been during the last two administrations. If we look at Israel and Syria, and Saudi Arabia and Yemen, our unwillingness to play an active role in the diplomatic efforts in these conflicts has disadvantaged the proxy engagement that we're involved in. Look at the Gulf Cooperation Council. Our inability to resolve what is a squabble between our Gulf Cooperation Council partners is the manifestation of our ineffectiveness diplomatically. Our inability to work anything politically on the Israeli-Palestinian front constrains the ability of the United States to promote this Israeli-Saudi anti-Iranian alliance. And I think it was different before, under previous administrations.

SUZANNE MALONEY: But was it different because of our capacity, or was it different because of the intentions and capabilities of the local actors? Because we're not able to force diplomatic outcomes on Israel today.

MARTIN INDYK: It's because we don't have the influence that we used to have on Israel.

NATAN SACHS: The United States has the carrots, it no longer uses sticks.

BRUCE RIEDEL: We should mention the uniqueness of Donald Trump. He has now simultaneously promised our two biggest allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, that he fully supports them, while communicating that “No, I'm actually not going to do anything really for you, I'm going to do things that are good for me and my domestic politics, but I'm not going to bail you out in Syria or Yemen.”

MARTIN INDYK: And you should pay the bill!

NATAN SACHS: Another actor that we're missing is the abyss, the Jihadi mess that is underpinning a lot of what's happening. If we think of the proxy wars, a lot of what is happening is being perpetrated by groups that are outside the influence of any one actor. And that's a big part of the problem and a big part of the calculation of all the other actors: how do we deal with these ungoverned groups, with al-Qaida types, ISIS affiliates, or anyone else. The Arab Spring led to the disintegration of a lot of state capacity. Those governments that remain are the ones that are now playing on this field. But the disintegration of Iraq, Syria, and Libya, that's where you get this abyss. And that's a crucial element. It's not quite proxy wars, it's really wars against this morass. And it very much affects the way the Russians, Egyptians, Israelis, nearly everyone, think of things.

BRUCE JONES: We've gone away from a phase in geopolitics where the major powers saw, at least in the main, a common interest in working together to tamp down civil wars. Great power cooperation on managing conflicts resulted in a huge decline in the levels of wars in the world over the last 20 years. More recently,

we've seen the fusion of civil wars and terrorism. More than 90 percent of all battle deaths in civil wars in the last five years have been in places where a terrorist group is one of the principal actors in the fight. People say, "Oh, all the powers share an interest in squashing terrorism," but it's not the reality. Instead of cooperating, interested actors get involved via proxies, which fuels and actually amplifies the dynamics of violence. We've seen a continuous increase in the scale of violence in these contexts where terrorism and civil war fuse, and we're paralyzed into a dynamic of amplifying the proxy warfare rather than resolving it.

Returning to the state level, Natan, you said earlier that Israel's first strategic objective is Iran, Iran, Iran. We hear again a buildup of rhetoric in Israel about the seriousness of Hezbollah's military buildup in Lebanon and the qualitatively different risks that poses, if you compare to previous weaponry and targets. Consequently, you hear renewed discussion about the genuine possibility of an Iran-Israel war. Not a proxy war, an actual Iran-Israel war. Is this a serious possibility?

NATAN SACHS: Well, in Syria we have Israeli-Iranian fire already. As our former Visiting Fellow Dror Michman and Yael Mizrahi-Arnaud wrote,⁶ this is a long-term issue because Iran is not going to give up its presence in Syria, it's shed too much blood and effort getting there. And Israel will never acquiesce to Iranian military installations close to it in Syria. But the risk of a full-out Israeli-Iranian conflict, with ballistic missiles flying between the two countries, remains low, and that would depend on an American or an Israeli strike on nuclear facilities in Iran.

An Israel-Hezbollah war is very possible, on other hand, and I think there are very dangerous incentives there. Israel has a preventive incentive in this conflict, even if it would obviously prefer to avoid a conflict. The possibility of a large number of accurate missiles in the hands of Hezbollah is not just different from the previous Lebanon war, it's unprecedented in Israeli history. It would be a completely different kind of conventional threat Israel has never faced from anyone. Israel is very small. It's the size of New Jersey, it has three major north-south highways. If you have thousands of accurate missiles to overwhelm Israel's missile defense systems, you have a completely different animal. Israel knows this very well and therefore has an incentive to prevent it. It is trying to prevent it, but if it felt that the threat was growing active, then it would act very strongly.

BRUCE JONES: In Lebanon or Syria?

NATAN SACHS: Certainly in Lebanon, and it's already acting in Syria. Would it go full scale? Probably not. I think it would try to limit action to the Lebanese theater, but not necessarily. And those theaters have now been conjoined in a sense. Between 1974 and 2011, the Syrian border was the quietest Israel had, bar none, including the Egyptian one, where there was a formal peace for most of the period. Since 2011, Lebanon has remained quiet, and Syria suddenly became the proxy for Lebanon, a reversal of what Assad always used to do. If Israel were to strike, or if Hezbollah thought Israel were to strike, then both would also have pre-emptive impetuses because Israel wants to strike while its intelligence is still valid on exactly where everything is, and Hezbollah would want to move things quickly.

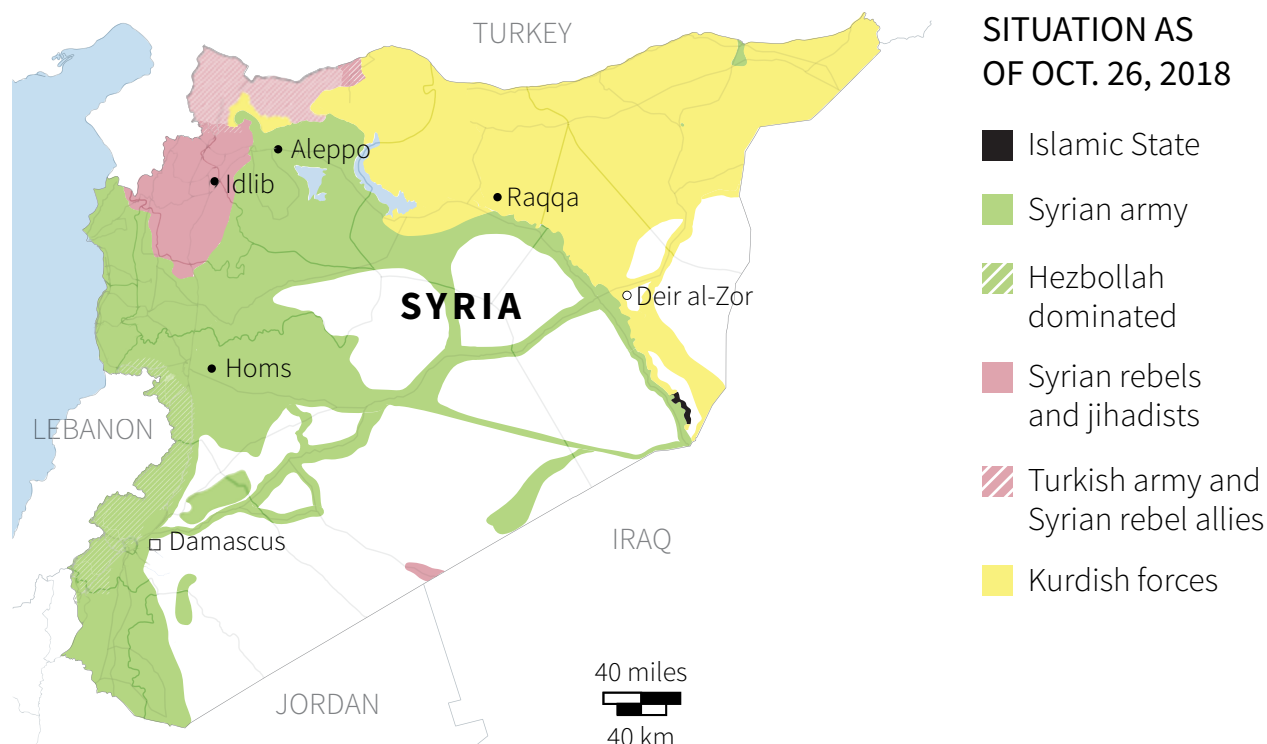
Still, whereas with Hamas I would say it's just a matter of time, unfortunately, with Hezbollah, I wouldn't say that. The deterrence factor is very strong on both sides. It could last for a long time. But the potential for another war, especially as things scale down in Syria for Hezbollah, is very real.

MARTIN INDYK: Israel would prefer to fight Iran in Syria, than in Lebanon, because all the advantages are on their side. And I think that they've been egged on by the Trump administration in that regard. If the Iranians put a foot wrong in Syria, they want to see the Israelis act.

NATAN SACHS: And with Russian acquiescence, thus far.

6 Dror Michman and Yael Mizrahi-Arnaud, "Iran and Israel face off in Syria, as if it wasn't complicated enough," *Brookings Institution*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/iran-and-israel-face-off-in-syria-as-if-it-wasnt-complicated-enough/>.

Syria areas of control



Note: Al Qaeda control in Western Syria not depicted

Source: Institute for the Study of War

M. Ovaska, 29/10/2018



MARTIN INDYK: But on the other hand, to deal Iran a real blow in Syria risks provoking a war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. And that's something Israel does not want.

SUZANNE MALONEY: The Iranians are not suicidal, and there's absolutely no prospect that they would precipitate a bilateral military conflict with Israel because they know they'd lose. They are existentially invested in their relationship with and their presence in Syria, but I think there's a degree of realism in everything that Iran has always done across the region. They're testing the boundaries, and the Israelis are kind of mowing the grass to limit their capabilities there. And that will probably continue for some time before there's a stable equilibrium.

I think we tend to overestimate the prospect for another Lebanon war, but that's perhaps because we underestimated it in the past. The important questions are, to what extent do the Iranians call the shots, and does Hezbollah exert its own autonomous interests?

JEFFREY FELTMAN: In my analysis, Hezbollah does not want a war with Israel right now. They have had their hands full with being the subcontractor in Syria. But, think about the 2006 war where Hezbollah made a mistake, where Hassan Nasrallah miscalculated. We can't dismiss an accidental war breaking out again the way it did in 2006.

MARTIN INDYK: It's interesting, during the first few days of that war, the Lebanese themselves were privately cheering Israel on. The Lebanese themselves were saying, "This is how we solve our problem." Even some Shiite leaders, but the non-Shiites mostly. But within eight to 10 days, the public opinion changed. And Hezbollah went from being loathed for having started this war to being seen as a national hero.

NATAN SACHS: And it partly had to do with the Israeli strategy of bombing Lebanese infrastructure.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. STRATEGY IN A CHANGING REGION

BRUCE JONES: If I were an informed but not expert foreign policy watcher, I would read this interview and think to myself, when I listen to presidential candidates in 2020, I'm going to be very sympathetic to somebody saying, "Wash our hands, why on earth are we in this place, it's like Game of Thrones, we don't succeed, our allies are not always reliable." What is the counter-argument to that?

BRUCE RIEDEL: The reality is that you can't get away from the tar baby once you've stuck yourself in it.

MARTIN INDYK: What happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East. It comes after you.

AMANDA SLOAT: We only have to look at the refugee crisis in Europe to see that American inaction in the Middle East, particularly in the Syrian case, also has consequences. Europe was flooded with refugees, which apart from the devastating humanitarian situation has contributed to heightened populist sentiments there and the corresponding rise of far-right political parties.

MARTIN INDYK: And the United States has viable diplomatic options. U.S. diplomatic leadership can play a positive role in the conflicts between Israel and Iran in Syria, and between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In Syria, Israel has no choice but to deal with Moscow because we are absent from the game. And, as Kemal pointed out, Turkey, Iran, and Russia are trying to influence the political and diplomatic outcome there, and we're not playing. Israel will quickly come to realize the limits to its ambitions in Syria because of the absence of the United States.

In Yemen, the Saudis need an active American effort to get them the hell out of there. It's the only way it's going to work. And yet we're not willing to do anything but supply weaponry.

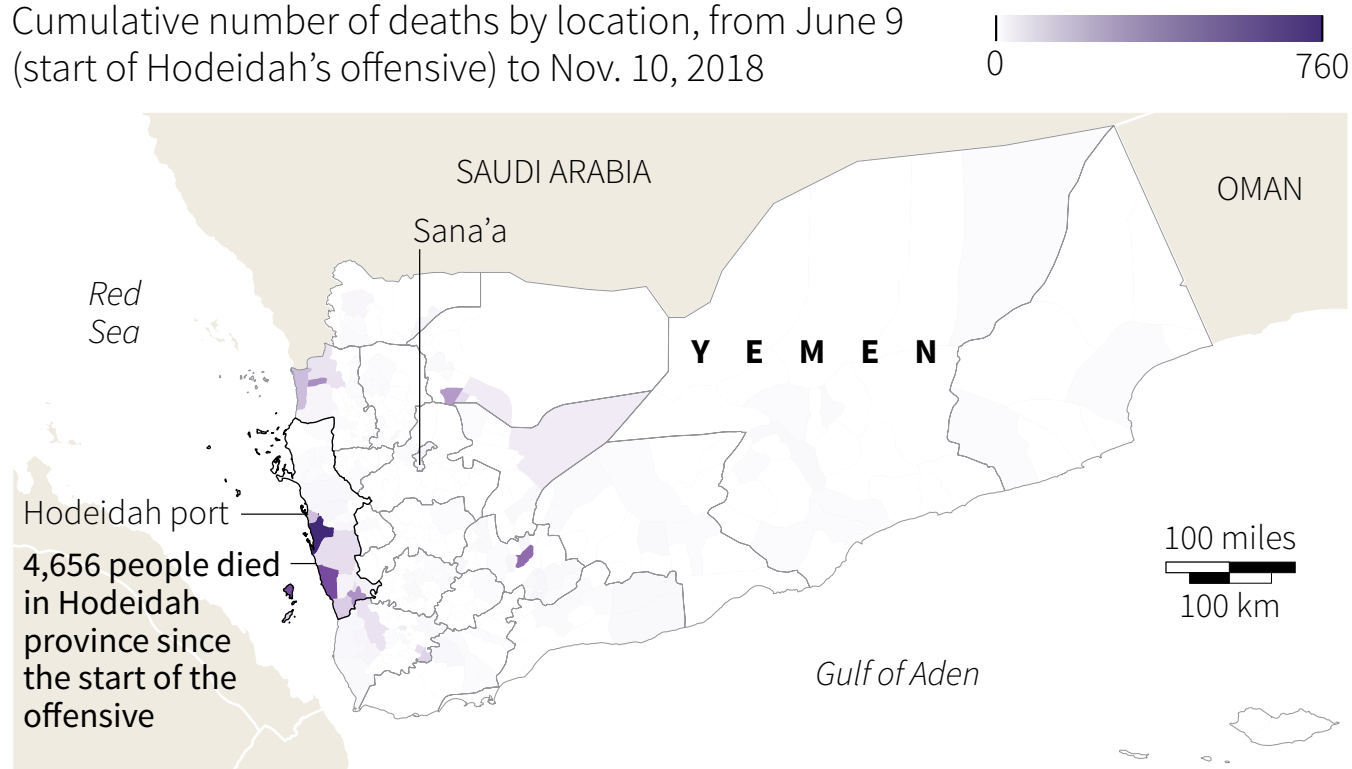
BRUCE RIEDEL: I want to underscore this point. If you think about smart American politics in this region, helping the Saudis get out of the morass that they've created in Yemen is probably the biggest thing we could do in the near term to help stabilize the Kingdom and stabilize the Arabian Peninsula. And it's doable. We have the means. If we call the Saudis up tonight and say "Cease fire tomorrow at 6:00 or no arms deliveries starting at 6:01," they'll say, "Yeah, okay, we got it." They would have no choice.

NATAN SACHS: That would have a huge human benefit in Yemen. It's not necessarily a geostrategic issue, but it is a dramatic tragedy.

Yemen war rages

FATALITIES IN INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE

Cumulative number of deaths by location, from June 9 (start of Hodeidah's offensive) to Nov. 10, 2018



Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

L. Desrayaud, 14/11/2018



SUZANNE MALONEY: I agree. Yet while it's easy to focus on Trump's unwillingness to rein in the Saudis in Yemen, this war began during the Obama administration. It was the Obama administration that directly engaged and expanded the U.S. role in the war. Fundamentally, it's a function of this difficult relationship between Washington and Riyadh, and our unwillingness and/or inability to impose constraints on a partner and an important ally, which happens to be a country with deep domestic and regional issues that we should not implicate ourselves in.

TAMARA COFMAN WITTES: It is worth contemplating that when the Obama administration came in and focused on stabilizing Iraq and peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians, it was operating to an extent on old premises about the Middle East, that stabilizing Iraq and working Arab-Israeli peace was enough to keep the region in a good place and let the United States pivot to Asia.

That premise was based on false assumptions about the roots of instability in the region, and we saw that erupt in 2011 with the Arab uprisings. The real roots of instability in the region were coming from the bottom up, from demographic challenges, failed governance, failed economic programs, and the forces of globalization impacting the region, the information environment, and the economy in ways that these states couldn't control. That was a set of assumptions that never worked their way into the early Obama policy for the Middle East. They sort of landed on the doorstep of the Obama administration, and I think forced a recalculation.

And so the challenge that Obama faced in his second term, that I think Trump faces and future American presidents will face, is not how do we back away from the Middle East, but can we back away from the Middle East. And if we can't do so without destabilizing it further, what are we willing to invest in stabilizing it.

NATAN SACHS: But I would also say that there's more structure than we sometimes think. It's true that a lot has fallen apart, but there are some very stable actors, some of them adversaries. I don't think it's Game of Thrones. And there's a lot that can be done. The United States does not need to occupy Syria to affect things in the Middle East much more than it is today. Bruce Riedel just pointed out a very, very doable action by the United States that could change the lives of tens of millions of people in Yemen. And that, in and of itself, is proof positive that we can be more involved, even on a smaller scale in some cases. The United States can do a lot with much less investment than we think, and perhaps no more boots on the ground than today, maybe even less.

BRUCE JONES: Let's talk some more about diplomatic initiatives. As far as we understand, at some point, President Trump intends to pull together either ambassadors or leaders of the region to explore a strategic alliance in the Middle East. It would pull together the full Gulf Cooperation Council, including Qatar, and Egypt, into a structured alliance, a free trade agreement, and a counterterrorism partnership. It would be a core membership aimed at Iran. Is that possible? This issue has been explored in the past, but is it actually possible to pull this together?

KEMAL KIRIŞCI: The notion of economic integration in the Middle East has come up on numerous occasions, but it has never delivered. And it will continue not to do so.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Since the inception of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, the idea of having a regional strategic partnership, integration among militaries, and a single address for the United States to pursue objectives in the region with regional partners, has always been the objective. Every administration has toyed with the idea creating an alliance, typically an anti-Iran alliance, although there's the counterterrorism component that transcends Iran. But it has never functioned, even within the existing GCC.

It's not because of a disagreement about the strategic threat from Iran, it's because of petty disagreements and local issues overtaking everything else. And I don't see how this administration, given the real questions about diplomatic capability and other issues that intrude, like the peace process, is going to be any more successful.

AMANDA SLOAT: Speaking of diplomacy, it's worth noting that the United States still doesn't have ambassadors—or even nominees—for Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

MARTIN INDYK: There is an anti-Iranian core common interest, but finding a functional expression for that is very complicated for the reasons that Suzanne has already stressed. Therefore you need a different kind of architecture that's much more flexible. This goes back to the failed efforts of the Baghdad Pact in the 1950s. That kind of formal NATO-like strategic alliance has never been possible in the Middle East because the differences between states are much greater than the commonalities.

Today, you can't get the Gulf Cooperation Council to make peace amongst themselves, let alone join together in a pact against Iran. You can try to paper it over, but it's not going to work in these circumstances. It could have worked before the siege on Qatar, but it's not going to work anymore.

Then you have Egypt. Egypt doesn't want to join an anti-Iranian coalition. Jordan would be too exposed if it were to join. So the notion of the Gulf Cooperation Council plus two doesn't work. And then Israel would join, but nobody else wants it in!

So, you don't want to start from there. I think it's just a mistake. Instead you need a regional framework that is focused not necessarily on anti-Iran, but pro-stability. And you start to try to build the pillars of an architecture with the forces that are in favor of stability in the region, but without the infrastructure of a formal pact. This would include an anti-Iranian concern because the Iranians are destabilizing the region. See what you can build out of that.

BRUCE RIEDEL: The Qatar dispute has not just broken Qatar out of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it's become a mechanism by which Oman has also, for all intents and purposes, left the Gulf Cooperation Council.

JEFF FELTMAN: And even watch Kuwait.

BRUCE RIEDEL: And Kuwait, which has to be careful. Kuwait is not interested in an anti-Iran jihad because it would tear the Kuwaiti body politic apart.

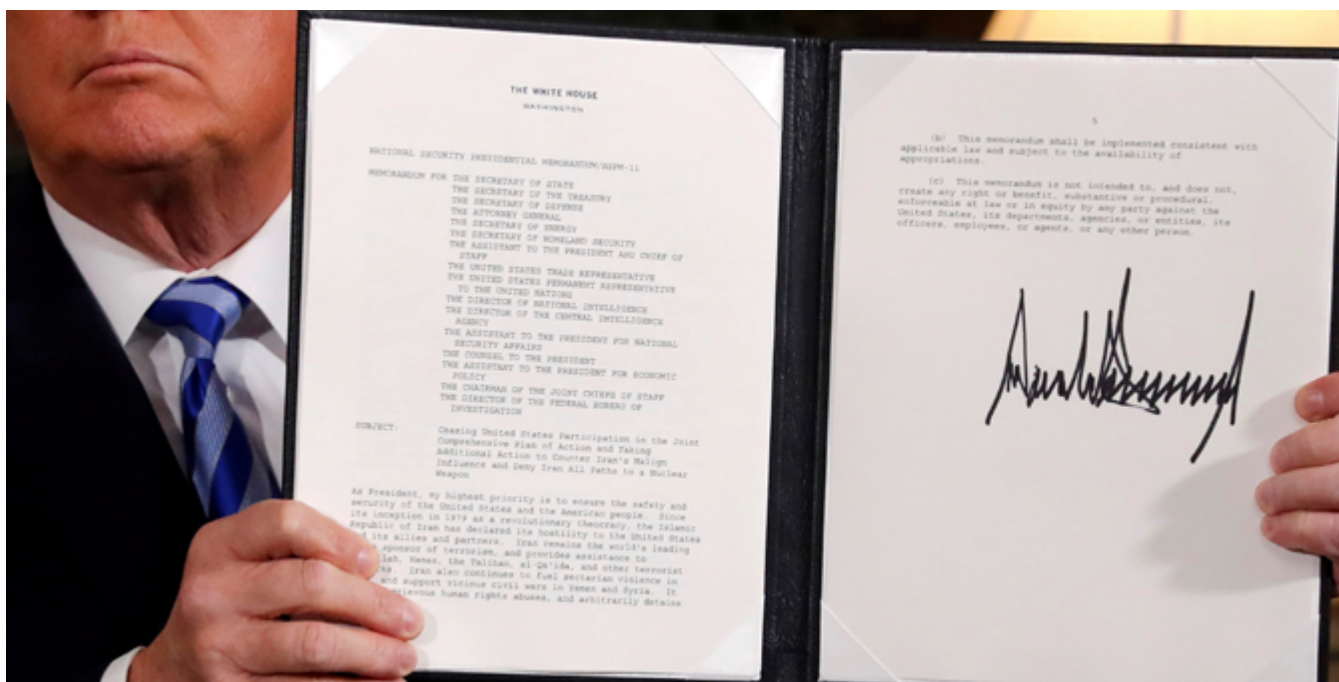
BRUCE JONES: The U.S. adoption of and subsequent withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is perhaps the most controversial diplomatic initiative of the last five years. How should U.S. policymakers think about the Iran nuclear deal as it stands today?

SUZANNE MALONEY: We have a problem if not solved then at least deferred with the Iranian nuclear issue. The deal kicked the can down the road, but fundamentally meant that we didn't have to be concerned about Iranians crossing the nuclear weapons threshold for at least a decade, and probably longer. But that was insufficient to all of our regional allies, and it was insufficient to at least half the American body politic. That isn't something that we can go to the Middle East to solve, but it really does entail a much more realistic debate about what we can feasibly achieve in the region and what it means in terms of our relationships with core allies, including Israel.

MARTIN INDYK: I think the Iran nuclear deal would have been acceptable to our regional allies, including Israel, if we had used it to then take care of the other problematic challenges that Iran was causing in the region. And that required us to work with our partners and allies.

SUZANNE MALONEY: If that were the case, the Israeli government wouldn't have launched such an effort against the deal, which colored the interpretation in the United States. The Saudis were effectively bystanders to the diplomacy with Iran for a decade without being heavily invested in the outcome. Part of the reason that this became such a toxic issue for all of our allies was the sense that there was regional and domestic opposition that was super empowered. And it brought Trump along with it.

MARTIN INDYK: But Trump gave them the opening. Trump campaigned against the Iran deal, "the worst deal in history."



U.S. President Donald Trump holds up a proclamation declaring his intention to withdraw from the JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement after signing it in the Diplomatic Room at the White House in Washington, U.S. May 8, 2018. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

SUZANNE MALONEY: He walked through a door that was opened by the Republican establishment and at least to some extent by Netanyahu.

MARTIN INDYK: There's no doubt that Netanyahu would have liked to nix the deal, but the national security establishment in Israel thought it was better to have the deal than not have it.

NATAN SACHS: After it was signed. Few Israelis liked it in real time, some simply thought it better to keep after it was a fact.

SUZANNE MALONEY: I agree with the critique.

It's an important to remember that the deal became a theological issue here in Washington. If you were pro-Obama, you were pro-nuclear deal—you believed it was inviolable and criticism of it was inconceivable. And you had the same dynamics on the other side of the domestic debate. Unfortunately, that created the sense that preserving the deal was the entirety of U.S. policy toward Iran during the Obama administration, and that we had to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that we preserved the deal because certainly in the minds of some Obama officials, it was the vehicle through which a broader set of agreements could be made with Iran.

That's never how the Iranians genuinely thought about it, and it was never realistic. But the efforts that the administration went to in order to reinforce Iran's commitment to staying in the deal, we now see that was totally unnecessary. Since Trump withdrew, they're getting no incentives, and they're sticking by their commitments. So the roadshow that the Treasury put on, John Kerry's efforts to try to talk up business in Iran after the implementation of the deal, were totally unnecessary. And meanwhile those efforts contributed to the sense of betrayal among our allies—that it wasn't just a transaction, that it was in fact an American effort to make peace wholeheartedly with Iran.

MARTIN INDYK: If Hillary Clinton had won the election, the policy would have been much stronger than Obama against Iran's efforts to destabilize the region. The Clinton team had in mind to renegotiate the deal eventually as well. In those circumstances, Netanyahu would have adjusted to the new administration's approach, but I don't believe that he would have gone hell for leather to destroy the deal.

SUZANNE MALONEY: No, and the Iranians would have walked away from it under those circumstances.

MARTIN INDYK: A far better thing to happen.

JEFFREY FELTMAN: There was never a consistent narrative on the Iran nuclear deal. On the one hand you'd hear the administration saying this is just about one of the issues, this is just about the nuclear program. The other narrative was this is the start of something much bigger. That second narrative simply was never going to be realistic, that this was going to open the door to some great Washington-Tehran understanding about the regime and everything else. It was that second narrative that really scared our Gulf allies.

BRUCE RIEDEL: Our Gulf and Israeli allies realized that the first narrative was a talking point and the second narrative was what Kerry and Obama really hoped they were doing, that this was going to be how he deserved the Nobel Peace Prize, by opening the door to Tehran.

SUZANNE MALONEY: And it was a fundamental misunderstanding of the way the Iranians were approaching the new negotiations and the outcome to the deal, and a fundamental misunderstanding of what the deal was going to bring to Iran.

Clearly Kerry and Obama, although they were very careful not to say it, believed that there was this sort of general wave of human improvement that was going to find itself crashing into Tehran. They believed that if you bring Iran more into the world, Iran would therefore find more incentives to moderate. But it's precisely the opposite. The Iranians have been able to do business with the entire world unimpeded, except for U.S. economic pressure, for the past 40 years without changing any elements of the way they approached the region or the way they approached their own population.

And so there was never any likelihood that rehabilitation economically and the removal of the European and multilateral sanctions and some American sanctions were going to somehow create pressures within Iran, which would then cause them to sort of back out of Syria or change their approach to Yemen or any other conflict.

BRUCE JONES: Interestingly, we haven't really discussed our European allies in the context of the Middle East today. I'd like to add a point here. I was in Berlin recently and was struck by the degree of anger among the Berlin elite at the extent of public American political pressure on German companies not to do business in Iran. And this leads to an erosion in Berlin-Washington relations that has consequences.

SUZANNE MALONEY: Germany historically was Iran's largest trade partner in the world. It was overtaken by China recently, but Iran still has major diplomatic and economic stakes in Europe.

AMANDA SLOAT: Bruce is right—Europeans are angry and this issue will be damaging to our bilateral relations there. They don't like American extraterritorial sanctions to begin with. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas even went so far as musing about developing an alternative banking system to SWIFT, given the effect that U.S. sanctions have on this international payment mechanism. Yet Europeans implemented their own sanctions on Iran during the Obama administration, with this pressure campaign leading Iran to the negotiating table and resulting in a deal that—as Suzanne just said—Tehran is still implementing. There is no appetite in Europe to start this process over again. Europeans also felt like they made a good faith effort to engage with senior administration officials—as well as Trump himself—to address his concerns about the deal and Iran's regional activities, but to no avail.

BRUCE JONES: So in sum, we have a less influential United States; a weaker trans-Atlantic alliance; a divided GCC; activism by Turkey and Israel, no longer aligned with each other and sometimes misaligned with the United States; and above all, rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Together, it's hardly a recipe for stability in the region!

CLOSING NOTES

BRUCE RIEDEL: The premeditated murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018 has reshuffled the politics of the region. The Saudi crown prince is on the defensive and Turkish President Erdoğan is driving a campaign to weaken Mohammed bin Salman if not remove him from the line of succession. The Trump administration has thrown itself behind the crown prince while the American public, media, and Congress want the prince sanctioned and the war in Yemen halted.

Khashoggi was an opinion writer for the Washington Post living in exile in Virginia. He was a longtime aide to Prince Turki al Faisal, and was at the consulate to get some paperwork for his marriage. Inside the consulate a team of assassins were waiting. His body has not been found.

The Saudis reacted with a series of weak and crude cover stories. The Trump administration has not challenged the Saudi versions and has specifically exonerated Mohammed bin Salman. The implications of the affair are still playing out.

In broad terms, the affair reinforces the importance of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and indirectly Iran in regional dynamics (Israel is a bit player on this). Turkey and Iran have gained influence at the Saudis' expense.

KEMAL KIRIŞCI: The saga surrounding the murder of Jamal Khashoggi is very telling in terms of how foreign policy and domestic politics become interwoven in Erdoğan's Turkey. By providing drips of information convincingly incriminating the Saudi government and Mohammed bin Salman in the murder, Erdoğan was able to keep the saga alive domestically but also internationally. It gave him the opportunity to display Turkey's policing and intelligence capabilities as well as project an image of himself as a leader standing up for a slain journalist and demanding justice for him. His own treatment of journalists at home and the poor state of the media in Turkey was very much overshadowed by the egregious nature of the Saudi crime. This was also

facilitated by President Trump's efforts to shield the crown prince with his now famous remark, "maybe he did, maybe he didn't," in contrast to the U.S. intelligence community's assessment.

In terms of regional geopolitics, it has also given Erdoğan a golden opportunity to delegitimize Mohammed bin Salman and in an ambitious move seek his removal from government. The latter is a function of how far Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the region has diverged from that of Erdoğan's Turkey since the crown prince arrived at the helm of government. Relations with Saudi Arabia had not been going well since the Arab Spring. Turkey, to the dismay of Saudi Arabia, backed rebellions against established regimes in the Arab world and became a staunch supporter of especially the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood government led by Mohammed Morsi in Egypt. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States like the United Arab Emirates did not welcome the new government because of a long history of hostility toward Muslim Brotherhood activities throughout the Arab world. They feared that these victories would energize the movement in their own countries. The situation became aggravated when Morsi was overthrown by a military coup supported by the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. Erdoğan strongly condemned the coup and allowed Turkey, especially Istanbul, to become a haven for the Muslim Brothers from Egypt and other countries, while Saudi Arabia extended billions in financial assistance to shore up Egypt's new military rulers. Nevertheless, Erdoğan was able to maintain a working relationship with the late King Abdullah who was careful to work with Turkey in providing support for Palestinians, including Hamas in Gaza, while supporting the military in Egypt.

After the accession of King Salman to the Saudi throne, Turkey developed close relations with Muhammad bin Nayef and managed to sustain a collaborative relationship against all odds. However, once Mohammed bin Salman successfully maneuvered himself into the position of crown prince in July 2017, the picture began to change dramatically and the Saudi-Turkish relationship became increasingly strained. This coincided with an escalating crisis between the two sides when Saudi Arabia together with Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt severed all ties with Qatar and imposed an economic blockade over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its refusal to terminate its ties with Iran. In response, Turkey sent additional troops to its small military base in Qatar as a deterrent against a possible Saudi military intervention, which would seek the overthrow of Tamim al Thani, the emir of Qatar. Turkey further deepened its ties with Qatar establishing a new food logistic line via Iran, enabling it to withstand the blockade. Yet, what aggravated matters for Erdoğan most were Mohammed bin Salman's policies toward Israel, his willingness to entertain Trump's Middle East peace plan with Jerusalem as Israel's capital, his close relationship with Jared Kushner, and his decision to pledge \$100 million to help with reconstruction in northeastern parts of Syria controlled by U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds.

The murder of Khashoggi thus became a golden opportunity for Erdoğan to embark on an ambitious project and seek a change in the line of succession to the Saudi throne by discrediting the legitimacy of the crown prince. The whole Khashoggi affair has benefitted Erdoğan domestically as well as internationally, even though it is not evident that he succeeded in achieving his ambition to see Mohammed bin Salman removed from power. Yet, throughout the saga, Erdoğan kept King Salman out of the scandal and showed deference by referring to him as the custodian of the holy mosques. This suggests that for the time being Erdoğan is likely to continue to seek a pragmatic relationship with Saudi Arabia, especially at a time when Turkey is going through economic difficulties and needs Saudi finance and trade. However, the presence of Mohammed bin Salman at the helm of Saudi foreign policy will ensure that both sides remain locked in a major rivalry as far as the future of Middle East geopolitics is concerned.

FINAL WORD

As this report was going to press, President Trump announced his decision to withdraw from Syria (though Senator Lindsay Graham suggested the timeline will be slower than originally announced). Many countries have interpreted this move as confirmation of a U.S. withdrawal from the region, while in the United States, some have welcomed the decision to leave the Syrian battlefield to Russia and Iran. How events play out over the coming period will likely shape how Americans view the Middle East heading toward 2020 and beyond.

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