

An Opportunity for a U.S.–Iran Paradigm Shift

The Arab region today is drenched in chaos and instability: Palestine is bleeding, Iraq burning, Syria erupting, Persian Gulf oil countries are trembling, Lebanon simmering, Afghanistan devastated, and Iran under adversarial focus. An array of unaddressed historical grievances and unresolved disputes add to this chaos. Starting with Tunisia last year, the Arab Street has virtually been under popular siege to break away from long-brewing political morbidity and authoritarian culture.

America as a superpower has had a longstanding interest in the Middle East, and thus is no stranger to the region. Unfortunately, the continuing U.S. domination in the Middle East—with its flawed policies—is creating strategic imbalances in the region and fueling intra-regional tensions with serious implications for the overall peace and security of the region. The flawed U.S. policies in the Middle East are already leading to its total alienation from the region's people. A recent poll—the first of its kind in the region, conducted in twelve Arab countries covering 84 percent of the population of the Arab world—shows 93.75 percent of the people look at the United States and Israel as the major threat to their interests.¹ Growing anti-Americanism in the Arab world is no secret.

One historic lesson that the United States must not “unlearn” is that its excessive reliance on undemocratic regimes and authoritarian dictators of the Arab world will not serve its long-term interests nor promote regional and global stability. The political and social changes now taking shape in the Arab world

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are an opportunity for the United States to re-examine its policies and build a new approach toward the region, including Iran. To ensure a successful strategy, Washington needs to divert its investments from the “palaces” to the “streets” of the Middle East. Washington’s paradigm shift would require establishing new relations with “moderate Islamists” within Muslim countries who would facilitate sustainable democracy and a regional security structure. Dialogue and engagement is the only way to build bridges toward a path of peace and tranquility.

The current upheavals in the region, if not managed properly, could erupt into regional chaos of unforeseen proportions and throw the area into perpetual instability. To avert such a scenario, it is essential for the United States and Iran, as the major powerbrokers in the region, to play a constructive role through mutual engagement and cooperation. This will not only serve the respective national interests of both nations but also ameliorate the regional environment. To realize this objective, Washington needs to recognize the legitimate role and interests of Iran in the region. This step would facilitate the United States and Iran to engage in a broader strategy which would address each other’s security objectives and concerns. That would, in turn, ultimately result in a higher probability for Iran and the United States to reach a “big deal” on outstanding bilateral issues, including the nuclear question.

Opportunity Provided by the Arab Awakenings

The last year has made the future of the Middle East very uncertain, but it was not unforeseen. In early 2000, when I was serving as the head of the Foreign Policy Committee of Supreme National Security, our national intelligence assessment already suggested that the Middle East was on the verge of major

changes; Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei proclaimed that a global upheaval against the United States was commencing.² The recent ‘Islamic Awakening,’ labeled by the West as the ‘Arab Spring,’ has strengthened his view on the U.S. collapse in the region and beyond. He concludes that the latest developments in the region indicate “the failure of United States dominance...[and that] the capitalist system has reached a

The recent ‘Islamic Awakening’ has strengthened the Iranian leadership’s view of a U.S. collapse.

complete deadlock, [while] the world is at a historical juncture, where the Iranian nation and Muslim nations can play a fundamental role in advancing Islamic values worldwide.”³ He is also confident that “the rise of Islamic identity

has become stronger than ever and has weakened the influence of [the] United States and Israel in the region.”⁴

The Arab Awakening has brought about seismic changes to the political and social fabric of the region—particularly with the downfall of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Yemen’s Ali

Abdullah Saleh. Two common threads bind these events together: First, they were all dictators who received their backing from the United States, Israel, and the West; and second, Islamists through popular vote have become the undisputed victors. Moreover, the Arab Awakening has changed the dynamics within many countries, with new rivalries emerging both regionally and internationally. Indeed, a showdown among regional powerhouses has culminated in a Sunni–Shia schism in the Muslim world. This has manifested itself as a duel between the Shia Muslim leadership, with Iran at its helm, and the Salafi/Wahabi strand of Sunni Islam, led by Saudi Arabia, determined to contain Iran’s influence and regional ambitions.⁵

The wave of change in the region has not made the Persian Gulf states, ruled by family oligarchs that have resisted change for decades, immune. Bahrain has come to symbolize the vast discrepancy in the reactions to the regional uprisings that have taken place.⁶ The West has remained suspiciously silent on Saudi Arabia’s March 2011 military invasion of Bahrain, which enforced the brutal government crackdown on pro-democracy protesters that has killed and injured hundreds of civilians. This has once again placed the United States in the uncomfortable position of dealing with a strategic Arab ally that is locked in a showdown with its people.⁷

Nevertheless, three areas in particular—where protracted hostility exists between Iran and the United States in the midst of growing instability and terrorism—will inevitably result in more divergence rather than convergence in the Middle East, and will prove critical for the region and for Iran–U.S. relations: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

Lingering Opportunities in Afghanistan and Iraq

In Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Iran played a critical role by siding with the United States and providing arms, supplies, and tactical advice to the Northern Alliance.⁸ Iran has been and remains one of the most influential countries in Afghanistan and an essential interlocutor, if not partner, in any regional or multilateral diplomatic process designed to limit the conflict there. Through this partnership, the Taliban were ousted, al-Qaeda weakened, and a

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new government formed in Kabul, a humiliating defeat that extended to the Taliban's ideological, tactical and financial sponsors, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. The subsequent protracted war in Afghanistan has cost trillions of dollars, and thousands of casualties have weakened the U.S. economy and its position in the region. The future of Afghanistan is marred in uncertainty. Yet, Iran–U.S. cooperation will remain a key factor in restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan.

On Iraq, long before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Shah of Iran viewed Saddam as his number one regional threat. That trend continued in the aftermath of the revolution, particularly owing to Saddam's imposed war on Iran from 1980–88 that cost both sides over a million casualties. Against this backdrop, the U.S. invasion of Iraq occurred in 2003, toppling the Saddam regime and shaking the balance of power in the region overnight while also reformulating the domestic scene within Iraq. Both Iran and the United States have solidified their relationship with the Shia government in Iraq,⁹ seeking stability and to root out extremist groups responsible for the wave of violence throughout the country that has cost tens of thousands of civilian casualties since 2003.¹⁰ Once again, invasion of Iraq has cost the United States trillions of dollars and thousands of casualties, which have weakened its economy and regional position. Although Iran has emerged as the biggest winner from the U.S. invasion of Iraq,¹¹ a sustainable security and stability in Iraq requires both Washington and Tehran's cooperation.

Meanwhile, in Lebanon, Iran has expanded its influence since the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982 by creating Hezbollah to lead the resistance against the Israeli occupation. The group has emerged as the most powerful political and military group in Lebanon, led by its charismatic leader, Seyed Hassan Nasrallah. The ultimate victory for Hezbollah came with its successful resistance of Israeli aggression during the 33-day war in 2006.¹² Therefore, the role of Tehran in any future stabilization of Lebanon will be critical. Thus, it is prudent for the United States and its Arab allies to cooperate within a framework that would include both Iran's and Syria's vested interest and influence in Lebanon.

The Syrian Conflagration

The focal point for regional and international rivalry—including but not limited to the United States and Iran—has begun in Syria. All sides have entered this battle and are unrelenting in their goal to see the other defeated. The stakes are high, as the victor will have a strong bearing on how the region will be shaped in the future. Both sides assume a 'zero-sum' game, where if they win, the other loses. But the reality is that Syria could well be the spark in an eruption which will unleash an uncontrollable conflict in the region—particularly since

Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and even Saudi Arabia are fragile—leaving the situation in Syria more likely to end in a “lose-lose” outcome for the United States, Iran, the region as a whole, and even many others if events continue on their current course.

The regional and international configuration manifesting itself over the Syrian crisis pits an Eastern Alliance (comprising Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah, and the Assad government) against a Western Alliance (including the United States, the European Union, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia). The Western Alliance has relied on Salafis—the backbone of al-Qaeda—and extremist Sunni fighters to conduct attacks on the ground against the Assad government. These fighters have received funds, weaponry, intelligence, and political support from countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹³ It is no secret that Syria’s neighbors are helping to fuel the crisis by seeking to bring about regime change in Syria.

Concurrently, the Russians and the Chinese have resisted the Western Alliance by vetoing three UN Security Council Resolutions aimed at allowing intrusive international intervention in Syria. This emboldened posture to resist the Western Alliance is significantly fueled by the diminishing status of the United States and Western countries in the Middle East and global affairs. Additionally, Iran, a key strategic ally of Syria in the region, has been a major source of strength for the Moscow–Beijing position.¹⁴ With the current turmoil embroiling the Assad government, Iran–Syrian relations have become a vital lifeline for the Assad government to maintain its grip on power. For its part, Iran has maintained its political backing of the Damascus government, even though Tehran has objected to the tactics Assad uses to curb internal opposition.¹⁵

The latest intensification in military actions against the insurgency seems to indicate the Assad government will continue its crackdown, while aiming to maintain the loyalty of the Alawites in substantial numbers. Other minority Sunni groups will also likely continue to resist and fight. Therefore, more complications will emerge as international, regional, and domestic rivalries intensify the already teething civil war within the country along sectarian and religious lines.

It is likely that the most extreme Sunni versions of Islam, such as Salafis, will emerge from Syria and use this turbulent time to propagate their extremist tendencies. The sectarian strife in Syria will not be confined to its borders, and will spillover throughout the Levant, Turkey, and Iraq, spreading to Saudi

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Arabia, Bahrain, and the Persian Gulf states, and ultimately reaching Israel. No one will win if such a scenario transpires.

In my view, Iran and Turkey will not totally escape the sectarian insecurity in the region. Yet, perhaps only these two countries—with their enormous human resources, strong national identity, and powerful internal stability and security—would be able to resist and survive as anything resembling their current form. Currently, Iran and Turkey (along with Turkey's U.S. and Arab allies) are inflaming the regional rivalry over Syria and beyond, while internationally Russia and the United States exacerbate it. Instead of widening the rift, Turkey and Iran should utilize their influence and leverage to orchestrate regional and international crisis management for the region.

An Opportunity for Cooperation Amidst Change

Beyond the region, Iranian leadership perceives the United States is weaker than ever before and on the verge of an economic collapse, accelerated by its economic troubles, successive failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, and deep-running public protests throughout the country (such as the Occupy movement).¹⁶ “[T]he United States and Israel totally lack any public backing in the world,” the Supreme Leader said, “and even in countries whose governments support them out of prejudice and weakness, the people—many of whom are not even Muslims—are opposed to them.”¹⁷

There is no denying that Iran's credibility has been damaged by its support for the Assad government; it could have played a more proactive role demonstrating its policy toward democracy through free and fair elections in Syria. Similarly, the blatant double standard applied by the United States and the rulers of Persian Gulf states have damaged their reputation and credibility. It has also awakened the Shia community throughout the Islamic world, asking for an end to the brutality inflicted on the Bahraini Shia population. Moreover, it has inspired minority Shia populations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to stand up and demand change—seen in recent clashes between Shia residents and Saudi officials in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia, where the country's major oil deposits lie.

The Persian Gulf will likely continue to be of vital national interest to the United States, ensuring access to the region's vast resources. Yet, Iran will remain the most important country in the area in geopolitical, economic, and social spheres. Iran boasts the largest population in the region, over 75 million people, which is greater than the combined population of all GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) plus Iraq. No matter what happens in the region, Iran will undoubtedly remain a vital player.

Unfortunately, the United States believes that the “Arab Spring”—coupled with sanctions and pressures—will limit Iran's stance and weaken its reach and

influence in the region, accelerated by Tehran's major socioeconomic and political woes. U.S. National Security Advisor Tom Donilon summed up Washington's view, stating that "This is a regime that offers nothing to its young burgeoning population, and which employs intimidation and violence to remain in power—the same recipe for unrest that has fueled the Arab Spring . . . Iran has failed in its cynical attempts to take advantage of the Arab Spring, which, to put it mildly, has been unkind to Iran."¹⁸ That assessment, however, is both shortsighted and could deprive the United States as well as Iran of opportunities to cooperate and help advance peace and progress in the Middle East.

The True Nature of the Iranian System

The United States must understand several things when it comes to Iran. First of all, Iran has a very important geostrategic location: Almost all of the greater Middle East's oil and gas resources lie either in the Persian Gulf or the Caspian Sea regions. The Persian Gulf possesses, by some accounts, 55 percent of the world's crude oil reserves and 40 percent of global oil exports, while Iran dominates over 50 percent of the whole Persian Gulf from the Iraqi border to the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁹ Furthermore, Iran has about 500 kilometers of Arabian Sea frontage, and its coast of the Caspian Sea stretches for nearly 650 kilometers.

As Robert D. Kaplan's explains in his book, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, "Just as shipping lanes radiate from the Persian Gulf, pipelines will increasingly radiate from the Caspian region to the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, China, and the Indian Ocean. The only country that straddles both energy-producing areas is Iran, stretching as it does from the Caspian to the Persian Gulf. In a raw materials' sense, *Iran is the Greater Middle East's universal joint*" [emphasis added].²⁰

In addition to possessing access to oil and shipping lanes, Iran has an ability to withstand international pressure and sanctions. None of the current sanctions could surpass what Iran endured during the 1980–88 war with Iraq, which in effect was a global assault on the young Islamic Republic. The coalition behind Saddam transcended Cold War politics in that both the West and the East gave military, intelligence, financial, and political backing to Saddam. The unity of the international community against Iran was so firm that the United States led the group in turning a blind eye to Saddam's use of chemical and biological weapons during the war. All this occurred within the early months following the Islamic Revolution that left the country in a weak position with limited ability to even maintain its own internal security. Yet, Iran countered the Iraqi aggression for eight years and in its aftermath had not lost any territory to the Iraqis.

U.S. strategists should understand the role of religion and clerics in Iran's political equations.

Many factors have enabled Iran to resist the United States, the West, their Arab allies, and the Israelis since the 1979 revolution, and even become stronger. Beyond its vast natural resources, geostrategic location, or ability to resist sanctions, one important reality that U.S. strategists on Iran should understand is the

role of religion and clerics in political equations of Iran and the region. The most powerful ideological-political party in the world is neither the United States' Republicans nor the Democrats; nor is it the Communist Party in China nor the Russian political establishment; rather it is the Shia Cleric Organization in Iran. It is this lack of understanding of the religious structure that leaves Western policymakers and some of their "Iranian experts" in awe of the resilience of the Islamic Republic.

The religious establishment historically has had a vast influence over the country. When an Iranian ruler during the Qajar dynasty in 1890 made the decision to grant a full monopoly of the Iranian tobacco trade to the British in return for annual royalties, the Iranian population saw this as a clear violation of their sovereignty. As a result, Grand Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi issued a *Fatwa* that forbid the use of tobacco as a religious duty. This ultimately forced the Shah to nullify the agreement with the British. Once nullified, Ayatollah Shirazi removed the *Fatwa*, permitting tobacco use once again.

In another case, popular discontent with a one-sided oil agreement between Iran and Great Britain in the 1940s set in motion the desire for Iran to have more control over its natural resources. While the democratically-elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, is largely credited with championing the cause for oil nationalization, the role of the Shia religious establishment has been largely omitted from the pages of Western history books. The turning point in the movement actually came when Ayatollah Kashani issued a *Fatwa* on December 21, 1950, stressing all "sincere Muslims and patriotic citizens to fight against the enemies of Islam and Iran by joining the nationalization struggle."²¹ Within days, thousands joined Mossadegh in the streets of Tehran. Three months later, the oil industry had nationalized.²²

Perhaps the most prime example of the power and influence of Iran's clergy establishment is the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah. The Shah was without a doubt the strongest U.S. ally in the region; in December 1977, while hosting the Shah in Washington, President Jimmy Carter raised a toast and stated, "Under the Shah's brilliant leadership, Iran is an island of stability in one of the most troublesome regions of the world. There is no other state figure whom I could appreciate and like more."²³ Yet just a year later, an old clerical

man, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returned from fourteen years in exile and orchestrated the downfall of a 2500-year-old monarchy system, also bringing down the main U.S. ally in the region. On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from France, with eight to ten million people lining the streets of Tehran to

welcome him back, making this resounding reception a unique event in the history of mankind.²⁴ Roughly ten years later, on June 3, 1989, soon after the Iran–Iraq War ended, Imam Khomeini passed away, plummeting the nation into mourning. Over the span of Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership from 1979–1989, Iran had experienced the most difficult period of its modern history. Yet, six to eight million Iranians participated in his funeral to get a last glimpse of their leader. Such a funeral ceremony has been unseen in the history of mankind.

From an Iranian Shia clerical point of view, “Islam minus the cleric, is Islam minus Islam.” The interpretation of this key statement is that the existence of Islam is directly linked to the existence of the clerics. This is one of the mysteries making the U.S. “regime change” policy more complicated—clerics view it as a threat to the very existence of Islam. The clerical establishment in Iran since the revolution has been able to expand its influence and power through a vast network of mosques sprinkled all over the country, with hundreds of thousands of clerics providing daily sermons to worshippers, and a dedicated social service arm that provides charity to the poor and manages orphanages and hospitals. These and other factors have interwoven the clerics into the fabric of society, making the system more resilient than the United States has imagined.

While the West is obsessed with the power of Ayatollah Khamenei as the Supreme Leader and ultimate decision-maker in Iran, they have yet to realize that the clerical system does not assign power to a single individual; rather it is a collective decision-making process, with heated discussions and debates among about twenty of the most revered Grand Ayatollahs in the country. Therefore, the current Iranian religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is only part of the clerical structure, influence, and power. It is essential for Washington to recognize this fundamental characteristic in order to communicate more effectively with the religious establishments of Iran.

Similarly, in a larger regional context, there are also prominent Shia Grand Ayatollahs in countries with substantial Shia populations such as Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq. They too carry enormous weight within their respective communities and beyond their borders. The followers of Grand Ayatollahs are not restricted by nationality or location—this has proven

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to be critical in the case of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, an Iranian citizen living in Iraq who carries the most influence and power within that country. The United States has also come to acknowledge his influence as key to the stability of Iraq, so much so that President Obama sent a letter to Ayatollah Sistani urging him to assist in the formation of a new Iraqi government in 2010.²⁵

These nuances in the characteristic of the religious establishments are paramount if U.S.–Iran relations are to improve. For over three decades, Washington has squandered precious political capital to build an international coalition to isolate and pressure Iran—these sanctions, UN resolutions, cyber war, and even military strikes won’t subjugate the religious establishment or the Iranian nation. Washington needs to recognize that Islam is the main source of Iranian power, and the religious establishments will play a key role in the future developments of Iran and the region.

The Way Forward

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney told CNN in August that Iran potentially poses the greatest national security threat to the United States.²⁶ Similarly, Michele Flournoy, President Obama’s top campaign foreign policy adviser, identified Iran as a chief threat in the Middle East.²⁷ Due to such assessments, despite not understanding the true nature of the Iranian government, “regime change” has been the core policy of all recent U.S. administrations.²⁸ This policy has played a tremendous role in Iran–U.S. rivalries in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, and will likely continue to be one of the focal points shaping the future of the region.

The United States needs a broader strategic policy that goes beyond the current obsession with Iran’s nuclear program—in order to make a “big deal” possible, the United States needs to address its regime change strategy. A U.S. policy based on coercive sanctions, pressure, containment, and isolation of Iran has not achieved its objectives. Furthermore, the United States has been unable to achieve other policy objectives including promoting stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, achieving an agreement on a Palestinian state, and avoiding further military engagements in the region.

It is crucial for U.S. policymakers, especially those who advocate sanctions and regime change, to understand that Iranian clerics are radicalized under threat. If this pressure were alleviated, it would inversely lead to their

moderation. The history of the Islamic Republic suggests that clerics have been more cooperative and flexible on international and regional issues when approached with consolatory policies. There are many examples that strengthen this view, such as when the clerics in the 1990s facilitated the biggest humanitarian exchange between Hezbollah and Israel, and also permitted the UN Special Representative on Human Rights for Iran, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, to visit the country.²⁹ In another case, President George H.W. Bush's inaugural speech in 1989, which proposed that "goodwill begets goodwill," paved the way for the constructive role Iran played in the release of the Western hostages held in Lebanon.³⁰ Washington's request for Iranian cooperation in the War on Terror also led to Iranian support in fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban in 2001.³¹

On the other hand, when Obama and Netanyahu recently threatened Iran with a military strike, the Iranian Supreme Leader during his Friday sermon responded that "from now onward, we will support and help any nations, any groups fighting against the Zionist regime across the world, and we are not afraid of declaring this."³² Instead of changing Iran's government, the United States should focus its regional policy on three key areas: addressing the Palestinian issue, engaging moderate Islamists, and pursuing a regional security pact.

Although Israel has invested heavily to portray Iran as the number one issue of the Middle East, it is clear that for the region and the world—including American politicians—the main issue in the region is undoubtedly the Palestinian plight, and it will remain so for decades to come. Therefore, as long as this issue remains unresolved, neither will the region embrace peace and stability nor will the United States regain its credibility. Moreover, the stained image of the United States as a belligerent superpower will continue to hamper its efforts to mend relations with the Islamic world. And as conditions for the Palestinians deteriorate, so will the security and safety of the Jewish population.

The sole focus of the U.S. leadership on unilateral and unconditional support of Israel—even in the face of brutal Israeli policies applied for decades on the Palestinian population—has ensured the issue remains unresolved. Today, the U.S. has zero chance even for its own two-state initiative and has nothing serious to offer. Therefore, it is prudent for the United States—for the sake of its own national interest, those of the Israelis, and of the wider Middle East—to adopt pragmatic and constructive policies which will advance a just peace and a true resolution of the Palestinian plight.

Another key change in Washington's political paradigm should include accepting new realities of the region, namely the widespread victory of the Islamists. Moderate Islamists are in majority through the whole Middle East, including major regional powers Iran and Egypt. To start, the United States should recognize that the future lies in its conduct and approach toward Islamists, which will require an overhaul of the current political mindset of

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policy-makers in Washington. I worked for sixteen years under the moderate presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Seyyed Mohammad Khatami: I am convinced if the United States reciprocated appropriately the moderate policies Iran adopted (which included overtures towards the United States), Iran would have not been radicalized during Ahmadinejad's era. By adopting a

constructive policy toward moderate Islamists, the United States will rebuild its relations with the Muslim world based on mutual respect, non-interference, and respect for the religious and cultural identities of nations. The success of moderates will not only strengthen democracy and stability, but will limit the influence of Sunni and Shia extremists. Therefore, it is imperative for Washington to act in a timely fashion and comprehend the importance of nurturing the moderate Islamists to bring about stability, security, and stemming extremists in the region.

In the midst of the transformation the region is undergoing, the United States is left with three choices regarding Islamists and extremism. First, it can continue its traditional policy of propping up dictators in the region. The collapse of the Shah of Iran in 1979, Bin Ali of Tunisia in January 2011, and Mubarak of Egypt in February 2012 all prove that the United States can no longer reaffirm its presence, influence, legitimacy, or reputation through such a policy.

Second, the United States can continue to indirectly support the roots and backbones of extremism in the region. Just recently, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted the U.S. government effectively created al-Qaeda.³³ While the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia view Iran and the Shia Muslims as a common enemy, radical Sunni sects (Salafi and Wahhabi) maintain that Israel, Iran, and the United States are their primary enemies. To reaffirm this view, in June 2012, Egypt's Salafi leader, Mohammad Hussein Yacoub, asked Egyptian president Mohammad Morsi to consider Shia, Israel, and the United States as Egypt's major enemies.³⁴ An al-Qaeda operative in Iraq recently spoke to the *New York Times*: "We have experience now fighting the Americans, and more experience now with the Syrian revolution," he said. "Our big hope is to form a Syrian-Iraqi Islamic state for all Muslims, and then announce our war against Iran and Israel, and free Palestine."³⁵

Alternatively, the United States could side with moderate Islamists to accommodate peoples' aspirations and desires for a more inclusive and representative government. This moment in history provides an opportunity for

the United States to reshape its longstanding policies in the region. Instead of giving lip service to advance aspirations of “democracy, freedom, and human rights,” the United States could take constructive steps towards those noble goals.

A third initiative that the United States could pursue to improve peace and prosperity in the Middle East is a regional security pact. As the most strategic region in the world in terms of energy resources and its export, the peace and stability of the Persian Gulf is of vital interest. Establishing broad political, economic, and security cooperation in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East is the only sustainable solution to secure energy, eliminate WMDs, abolish terrorism, prevent sectarian conflict, and lay the foundation for democracy. This new cooperation—representing all regional players—should be a priority for regional states and foreign powers.

Such a regional security pact would provide Iran with an opportunity to legitimize its power and realize its rights and goals through cooperation and participation. A regional security pact will also allow Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two competing powers in the Persian Gulf, to put aside their win-lose rivalry and instead work toward growth and development. Successfully establishing a Persian Gulf Security Cooperation Organization could provide the grounds for expansion to the whole Middle East.

Pursue Common Interests, not Regime Change

While the United States and Iran’s security objectives are hampered by a conflict of interest in some areas, common interests do exist on some major issues. The Iranian major concern in its foreign policy is about preserving its own identity as the Islamic Republic. Therefore, ensuring ontological security and sustaining Iran’s identity would be an absolute priority in security arrangements between Iran and the United States. That is why the U.S. policy of regime change must transform, or both countries and the entire region will face a deteriorating “lose-lose” situation. Washington and Tehran must instead emphasize our mutual interests, with policies adapted to facilitate both countries’ security objectives. This will create positive momentum that could also enable compromise on more difficult matters. Ultimately, it is vital to forego the current zero-sum approach that has entangled both nations.

The interests of Iran and the United States converge on many fronts that include:

- Improving economic ties in all sectors, particularly the oil and gas industry;
- Fighting against terrorism and the spread of regional extremism (particularly al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Jundallah);

- Strengthening security and stability in Afghanistan and Iraq to enable an expedited removal of U.S. forces;
- Promoting the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- Preventing Israel from taking military action against Iran, resulting in further insecurity and instability in the region;
- Facilitating cultural and travel exchanges with improved diplomatic ties to facilitate such measures, and last but not least;
- Enhancing stability in Iran to prevent further crisis in the Middle East.

To be realistic, the United States will remain a deeply engaged superpower in the region because of vital interests in energy, geopolitics, and the socioeconomic importance of the region. Considering its huge budget deficit and the realities in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States needs to rethink its policy in the Persian Gulf and Middle East by pursuing these common interests with Iran to improve regional security and stability rather than pursuing regime change. This can be achieved with far less cost than is now exacted from the United States in terms of blood, budget, credibility, and influence. This strategy will also ensure that the interests of other international players—such as Russia, China, and the European Union—are accounted for, particularly as they strive to cooperate towards a more stable, secure, and economically prosperous region. This can serve as a basis and model for the whole Middle East.

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