WHAT ARE THE MAIN RISKS WE FACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?

The Trump administration faces a wide range of major challenges in the Middle East. Some will have to be dealt with quickly, and others will have to be dealt with over years or decades. Most, however, have two things in common: There is no easy or good U.S. policy option, and no way to avoid serious risks.

Some of these challenges are obvious. They are the logical result of the rise of ISIS and Islamic extremism; legacies from the U.S. invasion of Iraq; threats posed by Iran and the arms race in the Middle East; the new role states like Russia and Turkey are playing in the region; and the range of problems growing out of the fighting in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

During the course of President Trump’s first term in office—and beginning almost immediately at the start of his presidency—the United States will need to deal with at least 12 major challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The United States must:

Rebuild its strategic partnerships with its Arab allies. The United States retains good military and counterterrorism relations with its Arab allies, but they deeply distrust its level of commitment, relations with Iran, and ability to act decisively and effectively. They also must deal with the fact that a 50 percent cut in petroleum export revenues has sharply altered their ability to modernize their armed forces, and deal with terrorist and extremist movements. One key issue will be whether to provide some form of security guarantees. Another will be to find ways of both reshaping U.S. military capabilities and making allied efforts more effective but less costly.

Decide upon the U.S. level of commitment to the defense of the Gulf against Iran, and deal...
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with the full spectrum of Iranian challenges. These challenges include the uncertainties surrounding Iran’s nuclear efforts and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); Iran’s expanding its strategic influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq; its search for influence over Shi’ite in the Arab Gulf states and Bahrain; its steady build-up of an asymmetric threat to shipping in and near the Gulf; and the steady growth of its conventionally armed missile and rocket forces.

Reshape U.S. counterterrorism efforts to fight the remnants of ISIS and the full range of other threats from Islamic extremism—in the region. All of the same forces that generated massive political upheavals in the Arab world in 2011 still exist or have grown much worse. Once (and if) ISIS loses its “caliphate” and ability to control territory in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, the United States and its Arab allies will still face major challenges from Islamic extremists, which interact with deep tribal, sectarian, and ethnic divisions. The United States and Europe will be targets for attacks indefinitely into the future, but the main threat will be in the MENA region and the rest of the Islamic world. The United States must continue to focus on key partnerships with all Arab states while avoiding actions that will alienate Muslims both in the region and around the world.

Find an answer to creating a stable and viable outcome to the Syrian civil war. Syria is one of the worst challenges the United States faces. Even if some political band aid could be applied, it seems unlikely that any form of ceasefire or division of Syria would prevent Syria from reverting to further conflict unless some broader solution could address its problems with the Assad regime, the Islamic extremist elements in its rebel forces, tensions between Kurds and Arabs, and reducing the role of outside powers. Half of Syria’s population is now refugees and internally displaced persons. Stability will prove impossible without providing some hope for these people to return to a normal life. Whatever reality emerges must also bring economic recovery and development to a country that lagged in economic progress and equity for decades before its current political upheavals began in 2011, and which now has only 25 percent or less of the GDP it had in 2011.

Help Iraq find some solution to the post-ISIS tensions and divisions between its Sunnis and Shi’ite and Arabs and Kurds. These efforts cannot be separated from the threat to Iraq posed by an unstable Syria, and the conflicting pressures on Iraq from Iran, Turkey, and outside Arab states. Some form of federalism may be needed, but splitting Iraq into mini-states is an almost certain recipe for further violence and human suffering. Iraq will also need to build security forces capable of deterring Iran, and a nearly bankrupt nation will need to both move toward development and create some form of economic equity to unite its divided regions and factions.

Deal with the conflict in Yemen, its steadily rising humanitarian costs, and the challenges in creating lasting security and stability. Yemen, along with Syria, is one of the most intractable challenges the United States faces. There seems to be little near-term prospect of any form of victory by the Saudi-led, pro-government coalition. The opposing Houthis and Saleh coalition is inherently unstable, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) prescribes a growing challenge in Sunni areas. Yemen already faced a major structural economic crisis before the civil war began, and food, water, and basic medical care now all present massive human challenges. The choices seem to be nation-building under extraordinarily difficult circumstances or some form of containment that could come only at the cost of immense human suffering.

Counter Russia’s role in Syria and its expanding influence in the region. It is unclear that the United States can find any effective way to limit the growth of Russian influence in Syria, or the impact of Russian intervention on regional perceptions of its growing strategic importance. The United States will, however, have opportunities to limit its role as a source of arms and military advisers in other states, and must be ready to deal with major new Russian arms transfers to Iran. The United States can also consider “horizontal escalation” like putting pressure on Russia in other regions such as the Ukraine, just as Russia has done to the United States in Syria. At the same time, the United States must reconsider China’s regional role both as another key source of arms sales to Iran, and in creating a new base in Djibouti. Restructure its relations with a post-coup “Erdogan” Turkey whose relations with the United States and Europe have become steadily more authoritarian, and that is intervening actively in Syria and Iraq. Turkey presents a steadily growing prospect of become a repressive and divisive regime that could lock itself into excessive security measures and prolong conflict with its own Kurds while seeking to intervene to deal with Kurds and Turkoman minorities in Syria and Iraq. Turkey will at best be a difficult strategic partner, and is a major “wild card” the Trump administration will have to deal with.

Help Egypt achieve security, but influence it to move toward economic recovery and growth, and reduce its current levels of repression and more extreme security measures. Egypt remains the largest Arab state, and is a key security partner that has provided critical transit rights for U.S. air mobility and through the Suez Canal. The United States will need to help Egypt in its security efforts, and its fight against extremism in the Sinai. It also, however, needs to use its influence to ensure that Egypt addresses its economic strains and places proper limits on its counterterrorism activity and treatment of nongovernmental organizations and legitimate opposition. An open break would only make things worse for both countries, but the United States cannot serve its own interest or Egypt’s simply by passively providing security aid.

Help other allies like Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia move toward security and stability. The United States cannot afford to focus solely on today’s problem countries. It needs to help its other regional allies prevent political upheavals, make economic progress and reforms, and establish effective security structures.

Fully implement the new security agreements with Israel, but also decide on whether to pursue the two-state solution to the division between Israel and Palestine. There seem to be few prospects for major progress in peace efforts on either the Israeli or Palestinian side. It is far from clear, however, that the Arab states will remain so preoccupied with other security issues, and Israeli policies and settlements are creating facts on the ground that could make a two-state solution impossible. Simply ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian...
issue or making largely symbolic efforts may not be enough. The United States must also consider the other aspects of Israel’s security: the low-level war in the Sinai, a post-ISIS Syria, and the threat posed by Iranian missiles and links to Hezbollah.

**Reexamine its calculus as to the strategic importance of the MENA region** in an era where the United States is becoming far less dependent on direct imports of petroleum, but steadily more dependent on the stability and growth of the global economy, and the stable flow of MENA oil and gas exports to Europe and Asia. It is not enough to talk vaguely about vital security interests. The United States needs a full-scale policy analysis to update policies and perceptions based on a very different kind of U.S. dependence on the secure flow of Gulf petroleum exports.

This list of challenges would be daunting at any time, but the United States also faces major domestic needs as well as other foreign challenges in dealing with Russia and Europe, the war in Afghanistan, and the emergence of China and security issues in Asia. It also is all too clear from the recent past that the United States cannot predict whether and when new challenges will rise in any of these regions.

Equally important, there are no “good” or simple options open to the United States in any of these 12 cases. Each case is driven by forces that mean it will probably still exist in some form after the president’s first term. Some cases already have persisted in some form for decades.

Like it or not, the Trump administration is inheriting a list of complex problems that it has to address simultaneously, all of which involve “long games” that have significant risks. There is no place in the MENA region for either passivity or the traditional description of the U.S. rush to action: finding solutions that are simple, quick, and wrong. ☐