



Leveraging U.S. Power in the Middle East

A Blueprint for Strengthening Regional Partnerships

By the CAP Middle East Team October 2016

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The geopolitical landscape that emerged after the end of the Cold War is facing recent strains from an unprecedented wave of global migration, climate change, and a more assertive Russia and competitive China—and the Middle East has emerged as a focal point for many of these challenges.

The administration of the next U.S. president will face a Middle East¹ challenged by regional power tensions; multiple civil wars; state collapse driven by political legitimacy crises; threats from rapidly evolving terrorist networks; record numbers of refugees; and escalating economic and human development pressures. These challenges, along with a new wave of regressive authoritarian forces limiting basic freedoms, will require the next administration to take a proactive and long-term approach to the Middle East.

Dynamics in the Middle East have understandably caused many Americans to question the value of U.S. involvement in the region.² Indeed, this skepticism is supported by the track record of the past 15 years, particularly the fallout from the 2003 Iraq war. But recent events and trends in the Middle East—from the rise of the Islamic State to the refugee crisis spilling over into Europe—demonstrate that the United States has important stakes in what happens in the region. Because of the threats that the Middle East presents for the homeland and the danger that continued conflict in the region poses to global stability, the United States needs to work closely with regional partners to adopt a long-term approach to the region that advances America’s interests and values.

Strategic priorities

Given the civil wars and counterterrorism challenges in the region, the next administration could find itself stuck in a cycle of reaction without a set of clear long-term strategic priorities to guide it. Going forward, the United States should shift away from a crisis management paradigm toward one of renewed American leadership in the region that seeks to more effectively integrate its stepped-up

military engagement with diplomatic and economic engagement. The problems of the region require a long-term approach, and policy planning should shift toward working with partners to outline an affirmative agenda for the next decade and look to what can be done not simply in one presidential administration. To this end, the next president should affirmatively set the following first-term and long-term strategic priorities for U.S. Middle East policy.

First-term action items

- Build on the Obama administration's campaign to defeat the Islamic State and Al Qaeda militarily by deepening multilateral cooperation with regional partners and taking steps to help create a regional security framework.
- Be prepared to use airpower to protect U.S. partners and civilians in certain parts of Syria.³
- Conduct intensified diplomatic outreach with long-standing regional partners, with the goal of organizing a regional conference by early 2018 on a shared long-term vision for the Middle East.
- Proactively counter Iran's negative influence and ensure nuclear deal compliance.
- Use leverage with regional partners to de-escalate internal conflicts.
- Work with global partners to create international compacts to support the growth of legitimate and effective governments and societies in the region.

Long-term initiatives

- Renew U.S. engagement on pluralism, values, and universal human rights, with a focus on the future generations.
- Recalibrate U.S. security assistance and cooperation to foster greater regional security cooperation and integration.
- Focus economic statecraft and engagement to encourage inclusive growth and regional economic cooperation.

The Middle East in 2025

With a more proactive and forward-looking approach, the next president can help partners in the region achieve the following outcomes by 2025:

- Defeat the Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates militarily across the region.
- Resolve conflict and make progress toward the creation of new, inclusive, and stable political orders in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.
- Reinforce the legitimacy of the region's nation-state system.
- Prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, including the continued effective and verified implementation of the Iran nuclear agreement.
- Begin the process of building a new Middle East regional security framework focused on both security and prosperity.
- Achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reinforced by broader Arab-Israeli peace and normalization along the lines of the Arab Peace Initiative.
- Support economic reforms to provide decent jobs to the region's rising generation.

A long-term approach also would help in crafting a more affirmative agenda. Bad news from the region too often obscures opportunities for progress. Despite its current problems, the Middle East can draw on important developments and potential assets, including youthful populations working for positive social change and the fact that some countries in the region are taking steps to change outdated political and economic models. These assets represent a silver lining in an otherwise gloomy regional picture. Yet the Middle East will need targeted engagement from the United States to make good on this potential.

A new U.S. administration brings with it an opportunity to consider once again a longer time horizon in the Middle East. The roiling dynamics of the region—both the long-standing crisis of political legitimacy and the massive societal renegotiations and rebuilding projects that lie ahead—highlight the need for a forward-looking vision that moves beyond the crisis response mode that has overcome U.S. policy over the past 15 years.

Recent events, particularly the rise of the Islamic State, have prompted the Obama administration in its second term to increase its investments in partnerships, particularly on the military front. The U.S. military has adopted an approach of working by, with, and through partners in the region—the correct formula for ensuring burden sharing and preventing a return to when the United States had hundreds of thousands of troops exposed in open-ended wars. But the current approach

is incomplete because it lacks a discernable long-term strategic framework. The effort to reinvigorate military partnerships requires similar efforts to build long-term diplomatic and economic partnerships.

In particular, the next administration needs to address a two-way trust deficit that has emerged with some of the closest American partners in the Middle East over the past 15 years. This trust deficit emerged for a variety of reasons, most notably the 2003 Iraq war and its destabilizing effects across the region. In addition, the demographic, economic, social, and political pressures within many countries of the region created a more complicated landscape for U.S. engagement. In recent years, however, traditional partners have cited numerous complaints: the varying U.S. responses to the 2011 Arab uprisings; differences over the role of and response to political Islam; the U.S. posture on Syria's civil war; and concerns that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was an attempt to build a new partnership with Iran. In addition, the Obama administration's effort to rebalance its overall focus to other regions of the world, such as Asia, created a mistaken impression in key parts of the Middle East that the United States was poised to fully disengage from the region.

For the United States, this two-way trust deficit emerged and grew in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in America. In recent years, the domestic political practices of some regional partners, ongoing explicit or implicit support by some regional partners for extremist interpretations of Islam, and humanitarian consequences of recent conflicts have led some Americans to question the value of these long-standing relationships.⁴

To make progress, the next U.S. administration should seek to recalibrate American engagement in the region. There must be a renewed emphasis on strengthening cooperation with long-standing partners, more engagement with the region's next generation, and an increased effort to build positive incentives to support political legitimacy and economic and social reform. Doing these three things at once will be difficult but can be achieved if the United States clearly states its long-term commitments and goals in the region.

The next U.S. administration should aim to shift America's primary security role in the Middle East from that of a security guarantor to that of a strategic integrator—helping integrate and upgrade the capacities of regional partners on all elements of human security. At a time of regional fragmentation, the United States can play an important role in building partnerships on the security, diplomatic, and economic

fronts that work to prevent the continued breakdown of the regional state system. Even as the United States continues to honor long-standing security commitments, it is essential that countries of the region—those capable of doing so—find constructive ways to work together to carry a greater share of the burden for building security, prosperity, peace, and respect for basic human dignity. Such are the region’s challenges today that actors both inside and outside the region need to do more to further their self-interest in a more stable future.

The next U.S. administration should work with both the people of the region and its most reliable and capable governmental and private-sector partners to strike a new deal with the Middle East—one that establishes a new basis for U.S. engagement that moves beyond the model of the past 40 years. The next U.S. president should redefine America’s leadership role to address strategic priorities and help constructive and forward-looking actors across the region channel their energy and resources to address the region’s core drivers of instability. The fact that several key countries in the region are putting forward long-term visions for reforming their economies provides new opportunities to encourage and support responsive and more inclusive governance.

Why the Middle East matters to the United States

The Middle East continues to matter for the United States in three main ways:

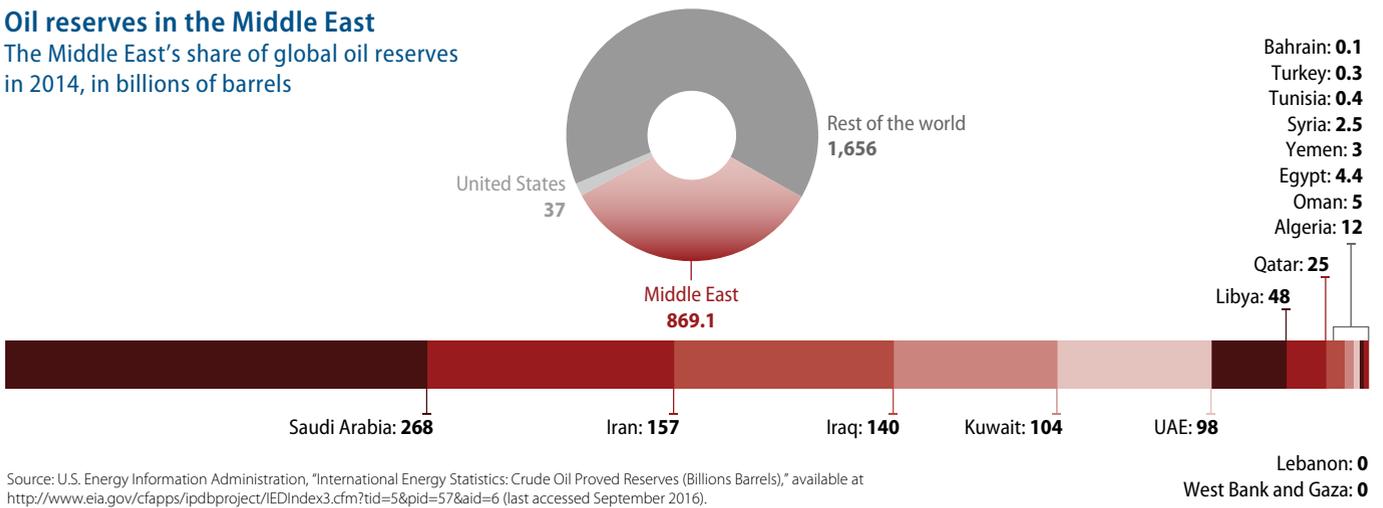
- **Security—protecting homeland security and defending allies.** The United States retains a paramount security interest in defending itself, its worldwide allies, and its regional partners against terrorist threats originating in the Middle East. This region is geographically at the epicenter of a broader area that has sometimes been called the “arc of crisis”⁵ that includes countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. The spread of the Islamic State around the world and the historic recent wave of refugees⁶ demonstrate that conflict within the region continues to have a significant impact on security beyond the Middle East, particularly for American allies in Europe. As bad as certain security dynamics within the region are today, it would be a mistake to assume that they cannot deteriorate further and provide greater freedom of action for unpredictable terrorist networks. The United States must remain vigilant regarding various scenarios, including the prospect that interlocking proxy conflicts in Syria devolve into outright interstate war and tensions between key regional powers escalate into direct military confrontation.

- **Economic opportunity—safeguarding America’s global economic interests.**

Despite the rise of renewable energy and the emergence of new oil and gas producers—including the United States⁷—the Middle East’s energy remains critical to the global economy. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and the Suez Canal are all key chokepoints through which global trade passes.

Moreover, the Middle East has long served as a vital land and sea transit point for global trade and commerce, and it continues to play this role today in connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. And even with its current problems, the region has significant potential for long-term economic growth. Several wealthy countries in the Gulf region, for example, are moving to diversify their economies, and this could create new potential for economic growth and foreign direct investment. While the past 15 years have made clear that the task of nation building belongs to the leaders and people of the region, the United States has unique expertise and resources to offer that do not equal sending large numbers of troops to the region or spending untold billions of dollars in U.S. taxpayers’ money. Indeed, economic statecraft represents one important way the United States and its international partners can demonstrate leadership in the Middle East and make a real and positive difference in regional societies.

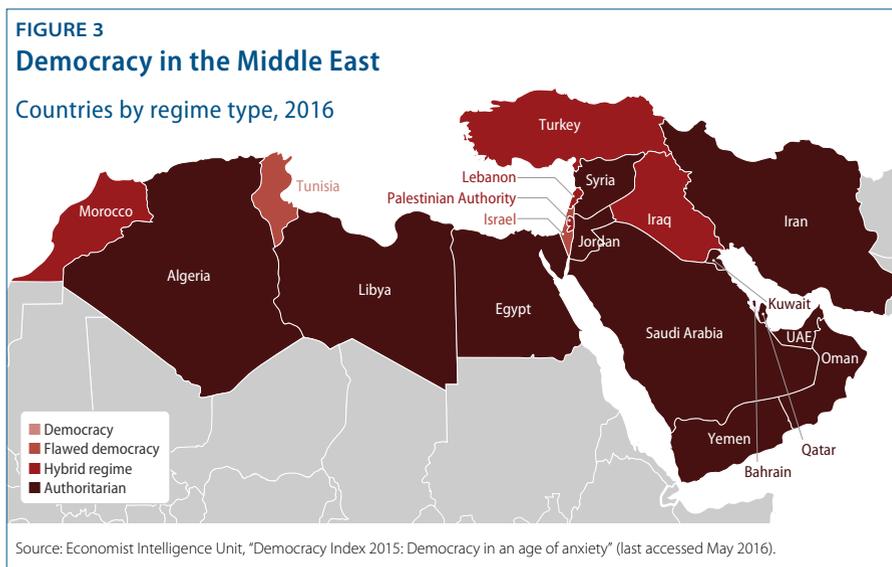
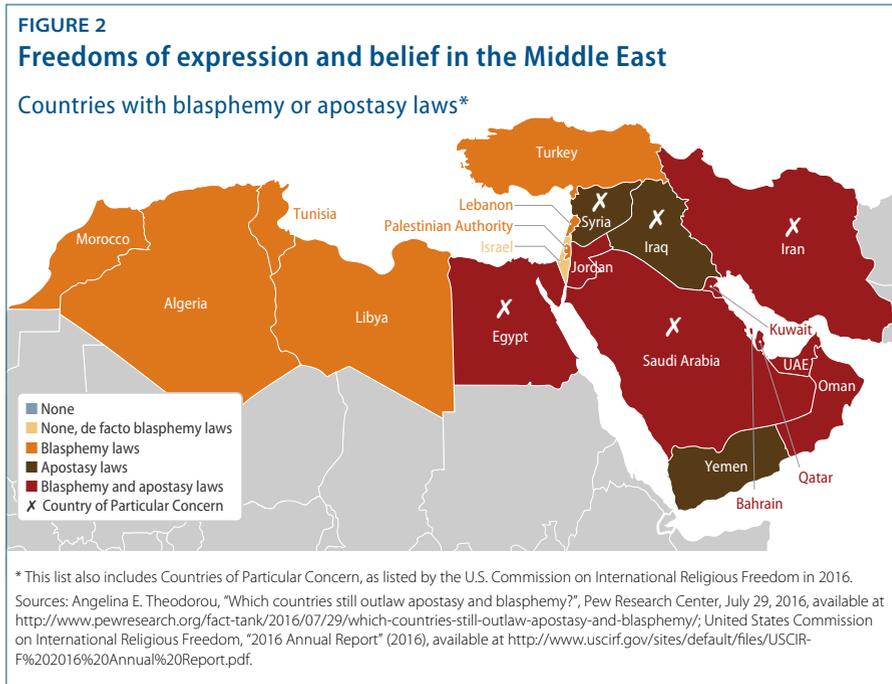
FIGURE 1
Oil reserves in the Middle East
 The Middle East’s share of global oil reserves in 2014, in billions of barrels



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, "International Energy Statistics: Crude Oil Proved Reserves (Billions Barrels)," available at <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IEDIndex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=57&aid=6> (last accessed September 2016).

- Values—the battle for basic human dignity and freedom against extremism.**

From refugee camps and cities ravaged by civil war to protest squares and overflowing prisons, the societies of the Middle East have been on the front lines of the worldwide struggle for human dignity and universal rights—and religious freedom, women’s rights, and gender equality remain a core challenge for basic



human dignity in the region. While the path to achieving these rights has proven difficult, America possesses an abiding interest in the worldwide preservation and extension of the universal values embodied in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms: freedom of expression; freedom of belief; freedom from want; and freedom from fear.⁸

Nowhere else in the world are each of these “essential human freedoms”⁹ contested more strongly than in the Middle East. And in no other region does the outcome of that contest have a more immediate impact on U.S. security, as seen in the brutality of the Assad regime against its own people in Syria and in the fight against extremist groups that aim to recreate an imaginary thousand-year-old society in the present day.

The Middle East is embroiled in a fierce contest of ideas at the intersection of religion, politics, and violence—a struggle that manifests differently in different places but affects the entire region. While humility is warranted regarding America’s role and capacity to dictate outcomes, this does not mean that the United States lacks the ability to influence the results. Nor is America neutral regarding the outcome. Beyond the narrow confines of violent extremism where U.S. interests are most acute, the United States has a profound stake in the emergence of political and religious pluralism; greater openness; equality for women; and respect for universal human rights regardless of ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

Almost a decade and a half ago, these basic freedoms were the subject of a series of prescient Arab Human Development Reports that clearly identified that the region faced four profound deficits which if left unaddressed would result in rebellions and instability: the deficits of knowledge; freedom; women’s rights; and economic opportunity.¹⁰ These were indicators for what led to the Arab uprisings, and they will continue to lead to instability in the region if left unaddressed.

The playbook outlined here will allow the United States to pursue its strategic priorities in the region, protecting its enduring interests and pragmatically advancing its values along the way. Moreover, this approach would work to encourage governments and societies across the region to take responsibility for their own futures. The United States can encourage and help the people and countries of the Middle East head toward a path of progress, but it will be up to the people of the region to actually walk that path.

A snapshot of the Middle East in 2016

Today, key parts of the Middle East are undergoing a chaotic process of political, economic, and social fragmentation, as the Center for American Progress has analyzed in numerous reports based on field research throughout the region.¹¹ Civil war represents the terminal end of this process, as the world has discovered in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

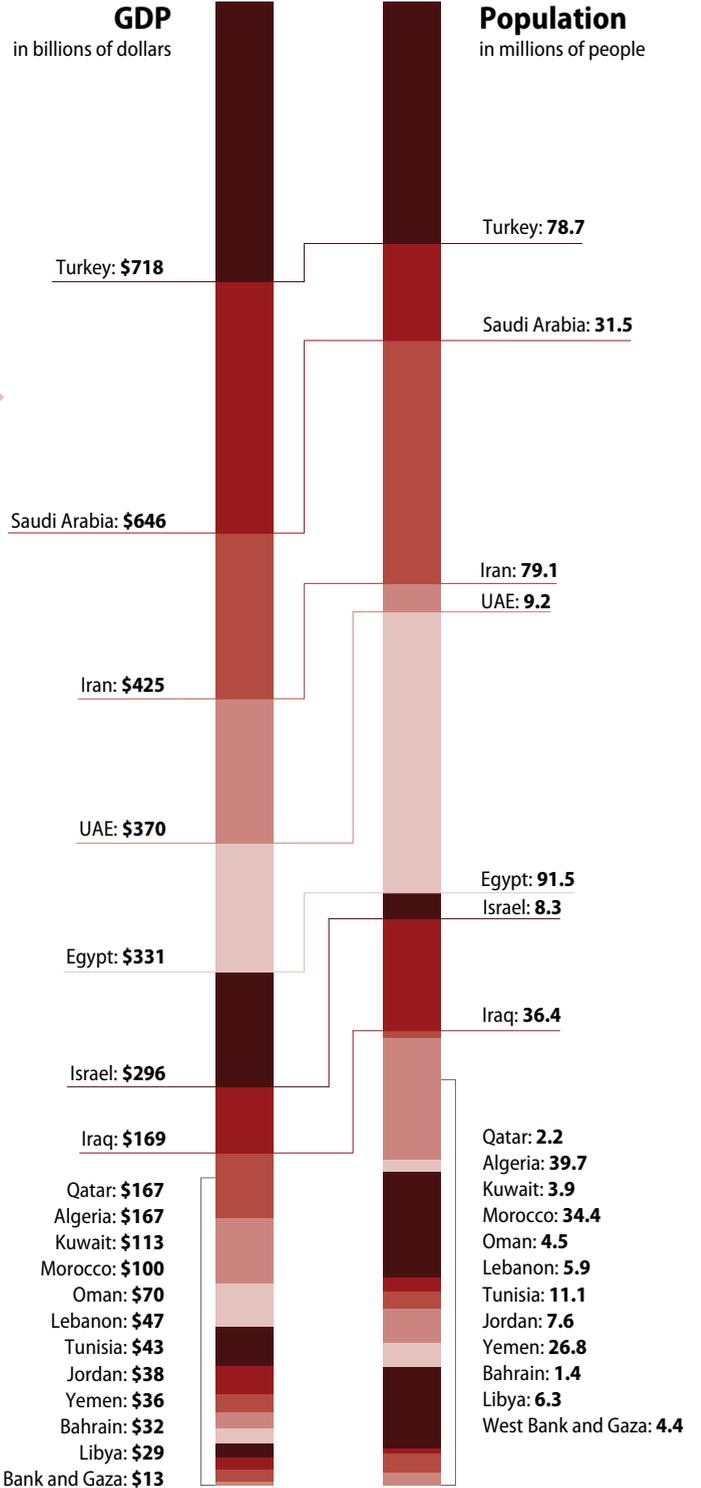
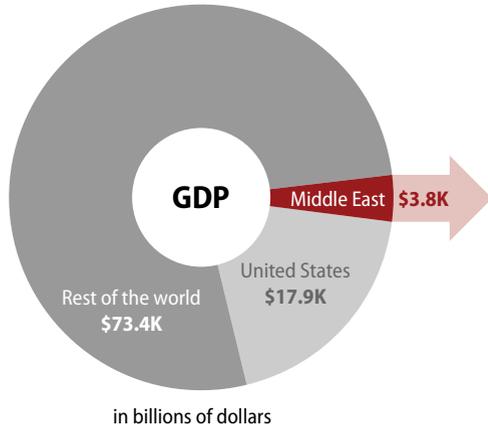
Other societies across the region, however, face less severe forms of fragmentation, such as persistent extremism and terrorism threatening Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Tunisia. The main drivers of this dynamic of fragmentation come from within the region itself, and are only partially a legacy of the colonial and postcolonial eras. External powers such as the United States, Russia, and European countries have also played a role, and at times the consequences of these actions have been devastating, as with the 2003 Iraq war.

Challenges in the region

- **Terrorist networks pose a threat to both the security and the integrity of states.** A combustible mix of terrorist groups and a new generation of jihadists seek to or already control and govern territory in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. These groups exploit the space created by civil war and sectarian conflict to build and establish themselves on the fault lines of fractured societies. From these positions, they expand their influence and control of territory and populations and project power abroad through terrorist acts they direct and inspire.
- **A political legitimacy deficit.** Today's Middle East faces a crisis of political legitimacy—defined here as having the “internal support for the system of government, expressed voluntarily by the people”¹²—decades in the making. Social contracts have eroded. The lack of open and vibrant debate about the future keeps societal discourse stuck in the past and present. Four states across the region—Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya—have collapsed outright, while others depend on external support or domestic political inertia to survive.

- **Extremist ideologies and a lack of compelling political alternatives.** The problems of terrorism and political legitimacy are linked to a broader challenge of the lack of political alternatives to the extremist ideologies espoused by groups such as the Islamic State. The lack of basic freedoms in many countries across the region has created an intellectual and political vacuum filled by extremism, sectarianism, and xenophobic nationalism.
- **Security responses and strategies that undermine the regional state system.** Regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically supported proxy elements and other countries to advance their own geopolitical interests in the region and around the world. In addition, states in the region, such as Iran, have taken measures that heighten insecurity, including recent missile tests.¹³ At a regional level, the Middle East as a whole lacks a comprehensive security architecture to govern and moderate geopolitical competition. The security structures that do exist are only modestly integrated, with regional states often cooperating more closely with the United States than with their immediate neighbors.
- **Stagnant economies that fail to provide for young, fast-growing populations.** The economies of the Middle East face substantial employment and growth problems today—much of them due to state-dominated approaches and widespread corruption. Most countries in the region have educational systems that do not provide students adequate preparation for entering today’s globalized, technology-based economy.¹⁴ But the region faced difficult unemployment and growth challenges even prior to the regional upheavals of 2011.¹⁵ Going forward, the World Bank estimates that regional gross domestic product, or GDP, must grow at a rate of 5 percent per year just to create enough jobs to prevent rising unemployment as more young people enter the region’s workforce.¹⁶ The Arab world has the lowest intraregional trade globally,¹⁷ in part due to its inability to resolve regional border conflicts.

FIGURE 4
Gross domestic product and population
of the Middle East, by country in 2015



Note: Data on Syria are not available.
 Sources: Data on GDP from The World Bank, "Gross domestic product 2015" (2016), available at <http://data-bank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>. Data on population from The World Bank, "Population, total," available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?view=chart> (last accessed September 2016).

Opportunities in the region

At the same time, there are some silver linings to be found in this otherwise gloomy strategic picture:

- **Increased initiative from within the region.** A number of America's regional partners have taken increasingly assertive actions to address perceived immediate threats. These actions have had very mixed results. Wealthier countries have deployed their resources in economic aid, security cooperation, foreign direct investment, and greater investment in means of public influence such as media outlets. Key U.S. partners in the region are finding new avenues for coordination and cooperation, but the increased avenues have also created new tensions. The increased initiative of America's long-standing regional partners, while destabilizing in some instances, also offers a strategic opportunity for the United States to encourage these partners to take on more responsibility for their own region.
- **Signs of longer-term views emerging in key countries.** More and more, regional countries have begun to take a long-term perspective on their societies and articulate their own visions for reform. This new dynamic is in part related to broader geopolitical trends—such as the closing horizon on fossil fuels and oil production and the steady rise of economic power in Asia. Over the past year, for example, Saudi Arabia launched economic reform plans aiming for success by 2030.¹⁸ Although the program's objectives and those of others like it may ultimately prove unrealistic, they represent a welcome willingness of regional governments to look beyond the present moment in the region and think about their long-term needs and prospects.
- **Increased opposition to regressive political and social forces such as the Islamic State.** Incomplete and stalled political transitions have set back freedom and basic rights within the region. Widespread outrage at the atrocities committed by the Islamic State,¹⁹ coupled with the popular backlash in several countries, such as Egypt, against Islamist movements, may present an opportunity to galvanize greater support for forward-looking values—especially where such sentiment can be separated from the authoritarian repression that has capitalized on it.

6 first-term action items in the Middle East for the next U.S. administration

The next U.S. administration should have six immediate strategic priorities to guide its Middle East policy.

Action item 1: Build on the Obama administration's campaign to defeat the Islamic State and Al Qaeda militarily by deepening multilateral cooperation with regional partners and taking steps now toward a regional security framework

The Islamic State represents a direct terrorist threat to the United States, its allies around the world, and its regional partners. It presents a clear and present threat to universal human rights of all those under its barbaric rule. The Obama administration has made significant progress toward the military defeat of its self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria. This campaign will remain a top priority for the next administration, as will the dismantling of the Islamic State's international networks. As the campaign against the Islamic State proceeds, the United States should remain vigilant about the other counterterrorism threats posed by Al Qaeda affiliates across the region, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Al Qaeda affiliates remain a major part of the challenge, and in some places, such as Syria and Yemen, they have embedded themselves more deeply into the social fabric.²⁰ All of these groups are part of a wider struggle to defeat extremist groups on the military and political fronts.

To this end, the next president should set an overall counterterrorism policy with two broad aims: 1) assisting partners and, where necessary, using force to disrupt and degrade jihadi terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda; and 2) discrediting the underlying worldview that drives these groups. Progress toward the first objective will be necessary in achieving the second. A substantial diminution of the imminent threat of jihadi violence will

allow the United States and its allies and partners to advance an alternative narrative of social and political advancement based on universal values. To achieve the first objective and thereby buy the time and space for the second, the next administration should take the following steps:

- **Build on current counterterrorism efforts.** Over the past eight years, the Obama administration has made significant improvements to the U.S. approach to counterterrorism. The next administration should build on this approach. In doing so, it will have three main models for counterterrorism action: the anti-Islamic State campaign in Iraq and Syria,²¹ the French intervention in Mali,²² and Operation Enduring Freedom in the Philippines.²³
- **Expand the foundation for enduring security partnerships.** The next president's counterterrorism strategy should not just respond to emerging crises or ongoing conflicts. It should also work toward a more sustainable and institutional partnership framework that maximizes the effectiveness of existing tools and operational concepts. The next administration should build on President Barack Obama's Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, or CTPF, and integrate it into its wider counterterrorism strategy—one that addresses the many factors that fuel extremism and place a higher premium on clear political alternatives needed to defeat extremism and foster more responsive and accountable governance. The next administration should also deepen intelligence cooperation with allies and partners around the world. Specifically, European efforts to share information such as the Passenger Name Recognition system and the recently established Europol European Counter Terrorism Centre should be supported.
- **Put forward a sustainable legal framework.** Although the terrorist threat has evolved since 9/11 and the Obama administration made several important modifications to the interpretation of the existing legal framework to fight terrorists when it entered office in 2009, the legal framework that governs American counterterrorism policy has not kept up. Congress, for instance, has yet to authorize the use of force against the Islamic State. When the next administration takes office next year, it should secure a new congressional authorization for the fight against the Islamic State in the first half of 2017, based on options previously proposed by President Obama and members of Congress.

Action item 2: Be prepared to use airpower to protect U.S. partners and civilians in certain parts of Syria

The Obama administration has made significant investments to fight the Islamic State in Syria—both from the air and on the ground—through support to partners. It has also dedicated substantial energy to repeated rounds of U.N.-sponsored peace talks and bilateral diplomacy with Russia to broker temporary cessations of hostilities. These measures have not succeeded in moving closer to the stated goal of a negotiated political transition in Syria. The next administration will face a serious and significant policy decision regarding the use of force in Syria to establish safe zones and to protect partners fighting the Islamic State.

As CAP has argued in recent reports, the next administration should be prepared to use U.S. airpower to protect civilians from regime barrel bombs and support moderate opposition elements.²⁴ While it is difficult to predict how Syria's civil war will evolve in the coming months, the next administration should evaluate options for the United States, its allies, and its partners to protect Syrian civilians from war crimes perpetrated by the Assad regime and its international backers. Russia's entry into the conflict in 2015 has prolonged the fighting and made a negotiated political transition less likely—it has also contributed to a worsening humanitarian situation, including increased refugee flows. In developing an effective response to actions by Russia and Iran in Syria, the United States will need to work closely with its regional partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC; Jordan; and Egypt.

Action item 3: Conduct intensified diplomatic outreach with partners, with the goal of organizing a regional conference by early 2018 on a shared long-term vision for the Middle East

During its first six months in office, the next U.S. administration should begin its work in the Middle East with a discreet dialogue tour with a focus on long-standing partners in the region—including, but not limited to, Israel; Saudi Arabia; Egypt; Jordan; Morocco; the United Arab Emirates, or UAE; Oman; and Tunisia. In a region plagued with political legitimacy crises, fragmentation, and civil war, these countries stand out for three main reasons:

- They possess a greater degree of internal cohesion and domestic political legitimacy compared with internally divided states—such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya.
- These countries have a greater potential to influence their neighbors and the overall regional framework. They are also working either formally as members of the anti-Islamic State coalition or in close coordination with efforts to enhance regional stability and defeat terrorist groups.
- Most of these countries have exhibited a stronger degree of initiative and activism domestically, regionally, and internationally.

Each of these countries presents specific opportunities and challenges, and CAP has analyzed and recommended steps in comprehensive reports offering greater detail on Israel,²⁵ Saudi Arabia,²⁶ Egypt,²⁷ and Jordan.²⁸

A major aim of this dialogue tour would be to quietly press these countries to more clearly outline their long-term affirmative visions. One outcome would be to organize a regional conference with close partners—including the GCC countries, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco—at the start of 2018 to outline a long-term shared vision for the region for 2025. The new administration must make clear that each country needs to define more clearly what each seeks to achieve, rather than defining their agendas purely in reaction to Iran or political Islamist groups. Taking this step will put bilateral relations on a more functional path. It can send the message that the United States seeks to consult with them closely regarding significant U.S. actions in the region, as well as start laying the groundwork for a wider regional security conference to occur in 2025.

This initiative should also communicate America’s own long-term strategic priorities and framework for engagement with the Middle East, as discussed throughout this report. This framework must be developed before the dialogue tour begins. As part of this effort, the United States should communicate three key messages to regional governments and societies:

1. America will remain engaged and present in the region but will expand its engagement beyond its strong base of military and intelligence cooperation to include economic statecraft and diplomacy based on forward-looking values.

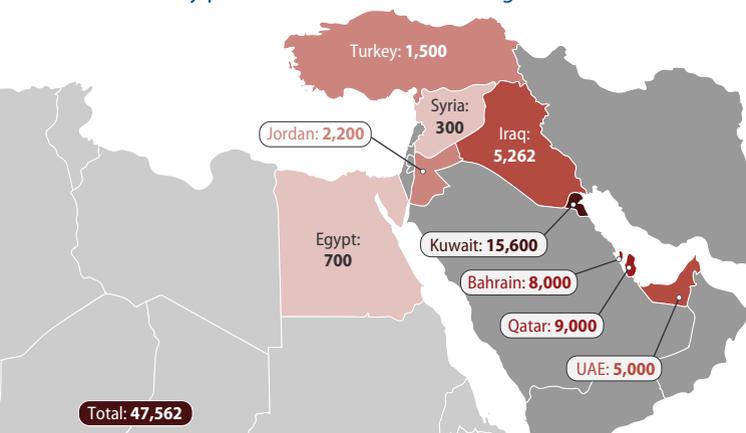
2. While America will honor its security commitments and combat terrorism, ending and preventing conflict will remain a core tenet of U.S. engagement with the region. The unrivaled U.S. security umbrella in the region will remain present to prevent major conflicts between states.
3. America will expect more from its partners in the region—especially in terms of putting forward their own affirmative regional agendas that go beyond reacting to adversaries—and take steps to define a positive agenda that supports religious freedom, equality, and basic rights for all people. The frequent complaints²⁹ from partners in the region over the Obama administration’s approach demonstrates that these partners remain reliant on the United States, and as a result, the United States has unique leverage no other global power has.

For all the challenges the United States has faced over the past 15 years, it retains major strategic advantages in the Middle East, as it does worldwide. America is the unrivaled international power in the region. While the United States welcomes the constructive engagement of other global powers such as Europe, India,³⁰ and China³¹ in the Middle East, neither these powers nor Russia possess as broad and deep a network of relationships with the region as the United States. China, for example, can play an important role in the long term in helping strengthen regional economies. Russia’s role in Syria has destabilized the region further, but it is ultimately an important factor that needs to be dealt with in any long-term political solution to that conflict. The next U.S. administration should work to institutionalize the existing patchwork of bilateral relationships in the region and direct the new activism of its regional partners toward more positive and constructive ends.

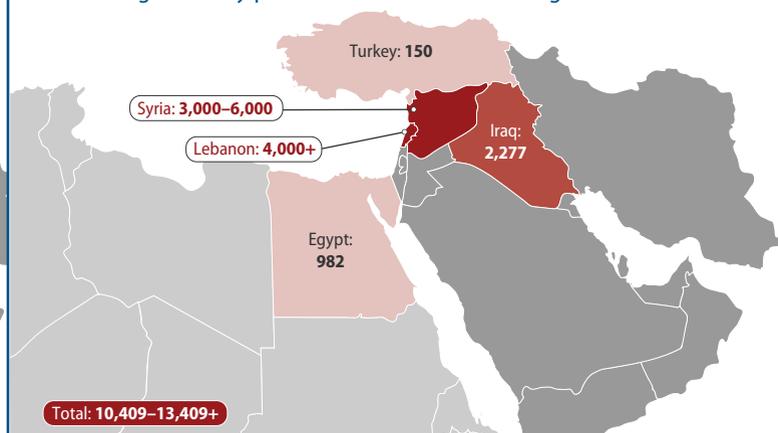
As a first step, the next administration can work with regional partners to build a shared threat assessment that can serve as a baseline for future security discussions. The United States must and will continue to stand on principle where America has disagreements with key allies and partners. The next president should ensure that there is consistency in delivering these messages to partners in the region across all key U.S. government agencies involved in regional engagement. U.S. policy toward the region has suffered, at various points, from a failure by different officials and agencies to speak with a single voice, undercutting important messages and allowing other nations to exploit fissures between security and diplomatic officials, between the White House and federal agencies, or between the executive and legislative branches. To ensure the credibility and effectiveness of its messages, the next White House will need to be vigorous in assuring close coordination within the administration and close consultation with Congress.

FIGURE 5
Foreign Military Presence in the Middle East

U.S. military personnel stationed in the region



Other foreign military personnel stationed in the region



Country	U.S. presence	Foreign presence
Bahrain	HQ, Naval Forces U.S. Central Command: 8,000 personnel	U.K. naval base, Combined Maritime Forces headquarters
Egypt	Multinational Force & Observers: 700 personnel	Multinational Force & Observers: 982 personnel from Australia, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Fiji, Italy, New Zealand, and Uruguay
Iraq	Operation Inherent Resolve: 5,262 personnel	Operation Inherent Resolve: 2,277 personnel from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom
Jordan	Fighter jets, Patriot missile batteries, and artillery in support of Operation Inherent Resolve: 2,200 personnel	Dutch and French fighter jets in support of Operation Inherent Resolve
Kuwait	Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force bases: 15,600 personnel	Belgian and Danish fighters, Italian reconnaissance aircraft, and U.K. armed drones in support of Operation Inherent Resolve
Lebanon	N/A	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon: More than 500 personnel each from Indonesia, India, Italy, Ghana, Nepal, Malaysia, France, and Spain
Oman	Access to air bases	N/A
Qatar	Bombers, tankers, and support aircraft at Al Udeid and U.S. Central Command forward headquarters at Camp As Sayliyah: 9,000 personnel	N/A
Syria	Operation Inherent Resolve: 300 special operations personnel	Russian air and naval base, with an unknown number of special operations forces, combat and support aircraft, artillery, and surface-to-air missiles deployed in support of the Assad regime
Turkey	Incirlik, Diyarbakır, and Batman air bases: 1,500 personnel	German reconnaissance aircraft and Spanish Patriot missile batteries: 150 personnel
UAE	Fighters and support aircraft at Al Dhafra Air Base: 5,000 personnel	French air, naval, and army bases; Australian fighter and support aircraft in support of Operation Inherent Resolve
Yemen	Unknown special operations presence	N/A

Sources: Office of the Press Secretary, "Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution," Press release, July 15, 2016, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/15/letter-president-war-powers-resolution>; Kathleen J. McNnis, "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016), available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>; Kenneth Katzman, "The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016), available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21852.pdf>; Kenneth Katzman, "Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016), available at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44533.pdf>; Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016), available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>; Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2016), available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>; Matthew L. Schehl and Gidget Fuentes, "The Marines' new Iraq mission," *Marine Corps Times*, February 14, 2016, available at <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/story/military/2016/02/14/marines-new-iraq-mission/79836640/>; Multinational Force & Observers, "MFO Troop Contributors: At a glance," available at <http://mfo.org/en/contingents> (last accessed September 2016); United Nations, "Peacekeeping Fact Sheet," August 31, 2016, available at <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet.shtml#FIL>; Associated Press, "Moscow says Russian warplanes have started to leave Syria," *The Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 2016, available at <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russian-warplanes-leave-syria-20160315-story.html>.

One key component of this initial diplomacy should be outreach to civil society, business communities, and other key constituencies that make up the diverse voices that exist in these countries. More than five years after the Arab uprisings, power within the region has become more diffuse and decentralized—even where there has been an authoritarian backlash and even in the most autocratic countries. The next administration must resist the temptation toward fatalism regarding the region’s political currents and reach out directly to the people of the region, particularly those who advance universal values. While much of the progress of 2011 has unraveled, America cannot afford to unlearn the lesson of 2011—that U.S. engagement in the Middle East cannot be confined to regime officials and security chiefs and must offer an affirmative agenda for progress.

Finally, the next U.S. administration should be prepared to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict. Early in the next administration’s first year will mark the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Although current prospects for peace do not appear favorable, a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should remain a key U.S. policy goal. The current situation does not bode well for an immediate return to direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians—but the next U.S. administration can use its unique relationships and assets to encourage its partners in Israel and the Palestinian Authority to take measures that can contribute to stability and ultimately produce a more favorable environment for talks leading to a lasting peace deal. For example, it can encourage Israel to enable Palestinians to have greater control over their economy and governance in parts of Area C of the West Bank that remain under Israel’s security control.

There remains potential for increased security cooperation—and more—between Israel and Gulf Arab states that can only be realized concurrent with a two-state solution and wider Arab-Israeli peace along the general lines proposed by the Arab Peace Initiative.³² In the interim, the next administration should take policy measures to improve the quality of life for Palestinians (discussed below) and keep a two-state solution viable.

Action item 4: Counter Iran’s negative influence and explore avenues for regional security confidence-building measures

A leading test for the next U.S. administration’s efforts to strengthen its partnerships on the military, diplomatic, and economic fronts is Iran. The United States needs to provide reassurance to its regional partners that it shares their concerns

regarding aggression and terrorism by Iran and its proxies in places such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen.

The Iran nuclear deal of 2015 was an important accomplishment that shut down Iran's main pathways to a nuclear weapon and reduced the risk of regional war and nuclear proliferation. The deal should be vigorously enforced and maintained, but it has not reduced tensions between Iran and its neighbors. Broad perceptions still exist among America's closest partners in the region, including countries who are key members of the anti-Islamic State coalition, that the Obama administration wanted them to "share" the region with an uncompromising and expansionist Iran. From the standpoint of these partners, Iranian influence has grown across the region over the past 15 years—particularly in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

These perceptions in the region hinder America's ability to strengthen the regional partnerships that are a core part of the current U.S. approach to the region of working by, with, and through partners to stabilize war-torn countries and defeat terrorist groups such as the Islamic State. Iran continues to play a destructive role in several of the region's internal conflicts—Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Increasingly, America's regional partners have taken more unilateral and uncoordinated actions that are counterproductive at best. If the United States wishes to de-escalate and resolve these conflicts, the next administration should step up efforts to counter Iran's destabilizing influence across the Middle East—especially in partnership with those nations concerned about Iranian influence.

The nuclear deal shows that pragmatic cooperation to address specific issues with Iran may at times be possible with strenuous and unprecedented effort. Contrary to the speculation of many within the region and without, however, the agreement does not make Iran a regional partner for the United States. Iran continues to pose a threat to U.S. interests and values in the Middle East and around the world. Tehran aids, abets, and engages in terrorism, prolongs civil wars across the region through support for proxies, works to subvert regional governments, and promulgates regressive norms and values worldwide. Until and unless Iranian behavior and attitudes change, relations between the United States and Iran will likely remain antagonistic.

CAP has closely examined the challenges posed by Iran in the region and issued a series of reports offering detailed recommendations.³³ These include increased military and intelligence coordination with Israel; implementation of security cooperation with Gulf states on cybersecurity, missile defense, maritime security, and special operations training; and enforcement of arms embargoes against Iran's proxies.

Action item 5: Use leverage with regional partners to de-escalate internal conflicts across the region

The region's conflicts have taken on a life and self-perpetuating logic of their own—one that creates open spaces for terrorist networks. Even as America manages relations with parties to the conflicts, resolving them must be a paramount priority and an end in itself. While the dominant counterterrorism approach to these conflicts has kept the U.S. homeland safe, it has failed to address the core dynamics of conflict that give rise to terrorist threats. A new approach by the next U.S. administration should examine ways to utilize unique assets such as arms sales and security cooperation with countries such as Saudi Arabia as leverage to help resolve conflicts.

The central concept of working by, with, and through regional partners that is at the heart of the current U.S. military approach to the region must be enhanced and built upon in the next administration. This means investing more in developing the comprehensive capacities of close partners, but it does not mean offering them a blank check or unquestioning support in their efforts to affect the conflicts roiling the region.

The next administration should seek to recalibrate political and diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the region's three main civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, while preventing a renewed civil war in Iraq after the defeat of the Islamic State. Of these conflicts, Syria has the widest reaching impact on U.S. interests and values. These civil wars have unleashed tremendous humanitarian suffering and massive outflows of refugees, while terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates have exploited them to establish themselves and expand. Driven by internal struggles for power between competing factions, these conflicts have been exacerbated by external interventions by regional powers seeking a geopolitical edge over rivals.³⁴

The Obama administration has made significant efforts to contain these conflicts. But its overarching approach to each country has understandably prioritized counterterrorism over conflict resolution. This approach has kept the U.S. homeland safe, but the failure to effectively de-escalate the region's conflicts leaves terrorist groups able to regroup, recover, and regenerate over time. In order to deny terrorists this breathing space, the next administration should look for opportunities to leverage all tools of U.S. statecraft to de-escalate these conflicts. The next administration should also invest in the regional tools required to support de-escalation, stabilization, and recovery. The following overarching recommendations should guide the next administration's efforts to de-escalate regional conflicts:

- **Set limited and achievable objectives.** If the next administration is to play a major role in de-escalating the Middle East's conflicts, it should have a sense of urgency and clear direction to guide its efforts. Instead of focusing on all-or-nothing attempts to resolve these internal conflicts, the next administration should aim to achieve durable ceasefires and clear lines of control in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. These ceasefires would decrease instances of violence against civilians, allow humanitarian relief to flow effectively, and isolate terrorist groups from the conflicts on which they feed. This more limited objective may be more feasible in the short term and can lay the foundation for a more comprehensive resolution of the region's conflicts down the road.
- **Examine conflict resolution models based on decentralized power and authority.** At their core, the Middle East's current civil wars and internal conflicts are driven by deficits of political legitimacy decades in the making. Unable to answer the challenges facing increasingly fragmented regional societies, few governments, political movements, or social institutions in the Middle East possess legitimacy in the eyes of their people.

In some cases—such as Libya and Syria—state structures have splintered. The United States needs to work with partners in countries divided by conflict and with regional powers to lay out new strategies to end internal conflicts and build more sustainable structures of governance. These plans should examine whether various forms of federalism or decentralization could help rebuild functional postconflict societies and create a more lasting framework for power-sharing and effective governance. Decentralized governance structures may have a better chance of succeeding in providing basic law and order, justice, and vital services while also enjoying the popular legitimacy of their people.

The United States cannot dictate the precise division of local and national political power in regional societies, nor should it try to do so. But it can and should recognize social and political realities and encourage federal or decentralized experiments that could better connect people to their government and its services. For instance, Iraqi federalism, for all its shortcomings, has managed to keep Iraq whole while providing Iraqi Kurds with an unprecedented level of self-government.³⁵

In addition to power-sharing in decentralized models, one key component to long-term stability in the region is accountability and justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the prosecution of the Middle East civil wars and conflicts of the past five years. Here, the next administration should focus on building cases for long-term accountability while taking care to ensure that its efforts do not create perverse incentives for parties to fight to the bitter end rather than agree to settlements that end conflicts. This focus on the long term need not preclude justice or accountability: Former Chadian dictator Hissène Habré, for instance, was found guilty of crimes against humanity in 2016—more than a decade and a half after his removal from power.³⁶

- **Support stabilization and reconciliation in Iraq and prepare for a continued advise-and-assist mission.** The Obama administration has made a significant investment in Iraq in terms of both troops on the ground and an air campaign to fight the Islamic State. It has also mobilized an international coalition of more than 60 countries in support of the counter-Islamic State campaign. These efforts have cut in half the territory controlled by the Islamic State, leaving Mosul as the only major Iraqi population center under its control.³⁷ But even once Mosul has been liberated, Iraq's terrorism and security challenges are likely to persist for some time. Divisions deferred because of an immediate threat from the Islamic State may well resurface, as will questions about the future of America's role in Iraq.

As CAP has argued, the United States will need to double down on diplomatic efforts to mobilize the international community to support the stabilization and recovery of areas liberated from the Islamic State.³⁸ It will also need to push for a more robust process of national reconciliation and decentralization that can give Sunni Arabs a real stake in the future of Iraq. Finally, rather than wind down its security presence entirely, the United States should downsize but continue its advise-and-assist mission to rebuild the Iraqi Army, support the Kurdish peshmerga, and help mobilize Sunni and other forces to police and secure their

own communities. A residual military presence inside Iraq, focused on a specific mission and with the support of the Iraqi government and people, could be a bulwark against the re-emergence of the Islamic State and give the United States greater influence in shaping Iraq's future.

- **Revive a multilateral support group to advance a U.S. power-sharing plan to end the war in Yemen.** The conflict in Yemen between the Saudi-led coalition and the Iran-backed Houthi movement has led to the deaths of some 10,000 people, including more than 3,800 civilians.³⁹ U.N.-sponsored negotiations to end 18 months of fighting in Yemen collapsed over the summer. The Obama administration recently launched a fresh international peace plan that offers Houthi rebels participation in a unity government.⁴⁰ The next administration should build on this effort by reviving a smaller multilateral support group for Yemen with key stakeholders, such as Oman and Saudi Arabia, with a mandate to reach an enduring political settlement based on power sharing between the Houthis and the Saudi-backed Hadi government. The next administration should also be prepared to use its military cooperation and weapons sales to the Saudi-led coalition as a means to develop a more effective, coordinated strategy for stability that links American support to Saudi respect for the laws and norms of war.
- **Work with a core multilateral contact group to coordinate both diplomacy and international military involvement in Libya.** Libya remains riven between competing political factions and local militias. The Obama administration has supported U.N.-led efforts to broker what remains an extremely weak national unity government.⁴¹ It has also scaled up operations to target the Islamic State with special operations forces, airstrikes, and support to local militias aligned with the national unity government.⁴² But all these efforts continue to suffer from a lack of coordination and even outright competition between regional and international players active in Libya. As CAP has previously argued, the next administration should call for the creation of an international support group for Libya similar to the International Syria Support Group.⁴³ A smaller group with stakeholders more directly affected by and involved in the conflict—including Egypt, Italy, the United States, the UAE, and Morocco—should coordinate efforts. The proposed group would coordinate political support for the unity government as well as external military involvement inside Libya. This involvement should be geared toward supporting the unity government, including efforts to combat the Islamic State.

Action item 6: Work with global partners to create international compacts to support the growth of legitimate and effective governments and societies

The United States should structure its foreign assistance to reward progress and reform in regional partners such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. Responding to crises has diverted resources and attention to challenges at the expense of opportunities in the region. A new approach for the Middle East would place governments with the willingness and ability to undertake reform at the center of a new regional partnership compact framework. These compacts would seek to reward reform and progress with tangible examples of what American help can deliver. Tunisia is well-positioned to benefit from additional assistance aimed at encouraging reforms, and countries such as Morocco and Jordan have benefited from the Millennium Challenge Corporation compact agreements, which serve as a good example of the tangible impact that such structured assistance can provide.⁴⁴

The goal of these compacts should be to foster greater political legitimacy in target countries through political reform, more inclusive economic growth, and increased respect for basic freedoms. These compacts should offer U.S. financial support and technical assistance for economic development in exchange for political and legal reforms that protect basic rights, deepen civic engagement, and promote the rule of law. Compacts would focus on a small set of achievable reforms that could be implemented in short-term time frames, leaving open the possibility of further funding should the recipient country successfully deliver on its commitments. At a minimum, these compacts should serve to trigger public discussions in societies across the region as to the nature of their social contracts.

The compacts could, for example, encourage participation in the Open Government Partnership, an international initiative designed to make governments more accountable and transparent. They could also be used to promote decentralization to make otherwise distant political institutions more responsive to citizens—and their rising youth populations in particular—and thereby enhance their legitimacy. Compacts could help incentivize the development of modern social insurance programs that safeguard individuals in times of economic hardship. Finally, compacts could help repeal blasphemy laws, lift restrictions on freedom of assembly, and encourage greater female participation in the workforce.

The United States should prioritize and invite other G-7 nations to participate in these compacts in order to increase their potential effectiveness.⁴⁵ Such collaboration would provide valuable and complementary regional expertise, expand the pool of available resources to fund compact projects, and defuse potential criticisms that the compacts are a vehicle for narrow U.S. interests.

Securing a massive influx of economic assistance from the U.S. Congress will be an uphill battle, and the scale of U.S. assistance relative to other actors will require a measure of realism. Nonetheless, the next administration should give serious thought to how best to repackage and focus U.S. economic aid on a discreet set of tangible efforts that invest in reforms, provide expert technical assistance, promote universal values, and forge closer ties with the people of the region—especially the rising young generation.

3 longer-term initiatives for U.S. engagement in the Middle East

Over the long term, the United States should aim to see a region more integrated in security and economic terms that is also making steady political, social, and economic progress. Three longer-term initiatives could seek to expand U.S. engagement on new fronts: values; security confidence-building measures and regional integration; and long-term inclusive prosperity.

Initiative 1: Renew U.S. engagement on pluralism, values, democracy, and human rights, with a focus on future generations

For decades, the United States has tried with very mixed results to elevate democracy and human rights in its agenda with key countries in the region. The George W. Bush administration launched a Greater Middle East Initiative in 2004 as part of its overall “Freedom Agenda” efforts.⁴⁶ The Obama administration responded to the 2011 popular uprisings around the Middle East with a number of new initiatives, including the Deauville Partnership with Arab Countries in Transition with G-8 countries, an effort intended to support job creation and transitions to “free, democratic, and tolerant societies.”⁴⁷

As Figures 2 and 3 on page 7 demonstrate, the Middle East remains a region where there is much room for improvement in respect to pluralism, democracy, and human rights. The next U.S. administration can take the following steps to renew its engagement on working to support progressively greater respect for basic freedoms and gradual growth of liberal, pluralistic attitudes in societies across the region—all with the aim of helping societies construct a new public square for dialogue and participation.

- **Support regional efforts to counter violent extremism.** The next administration should build on the efforts established by the Obama administration to support regional efforts to counter terrorist narratives. Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt have all initiated efforts to counter violent extrem-

ists. The UAE, for instance, established an International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, also known as Hedayah, in December 2012.⁴⁸ Both Egypt and Morocco train imams and religious scholars from different parts of the globe, and their religious institutions produce literature that delegitimizes extremist ideologies. However, these efforts are only in their infancy, and more can be done to produce effective results.

The United States should encourage greater regional coordination and support regional counter violent extremism, or CVE, efforts that focus on challenging extremist narratives. The United States can also play a role in facilitating greater cooperation between Middle Eastern religious institutions and U.S. technology and communications firms to help more effectively promote their counternarratives on new media platforms. Other CVE efforts that focus on deradicalization and building community resiliency should be part of a broader regional coordination effort to help promote and transfer best practices.

The United States should also work with partners in the region to explore avenues for modernizing education as a means of countering Islamist extremism. Such efforts should focus on confronting extremist ideas and ideology at their core rather than on particular groups. These efforts could include curricula reforms and initiatives to stimulate real and robust debates of ideas in traditional media. Such reforms could address how history is taught and challenge conspiracy theories, along with anti-Western and anti-Semitic literature. For instance, Arabic translations of books on Western political thought and values remain few in number and are not available in sufficient numbers to compete with extremist and conspiracy literature.

- **Renew engagement with countries aimed at supporting pluralism, basic freedoms, and dignity.** Beyond the narrow confines of violent extremism where U.S. security interests are most acute, the United States has a profound stake in the emergence of political and religious pluralism; greater openness; equality for women; and universal human rights regardless of ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. The narratives of violent extremist groups are unlikely be defeated in an environment of political repression and lack of respect for basic freedoms. Current crisis response efforts to counter violent extremism should be supplemented with efforts to counter Sunni-Shia sectarianism and support freedoms of expression and belief.⁴⁹ Extremist narratives will not be defeated without clarifying and promoting an alternative, liberal political project to which citizens across the region can subscribe.

Freedoms of expression and belief are the bedrock of political legitimacy and democratic government. Without these freedoms, an open exchange of ideas and policies is impossible. Indeed, a lack of real debate across the Middle East underlies the region's myriad problems—civil wars and terrorism, deficits of political legitimacy, and stagnant economies. Restrictions on the freedoms of expression and belief remain in place in virtually every regional country (see Figure 2 on page 7). Without a free contest of ideas in the Middle East, U.S. security, political, and economic policy successes in the region will likely prove elusive or ephemeral.

The next president should set out a vision of social and political progress in the region that the United States is prepared to support—and one that the people of the region can rally behind. This vision should focus on good governance, inclusive prosperity, and greater respect for freedoms of expression and belief.

As a rhetorical first step, the next administration should avoid defining American engagement in the Middle East in religious or sectarian terms. In its 2014 report on regional fragmentation and competition, CAP noted the disadvantages inherent in this framing and called for a more effective rhetorical framework based on inclusion, pluralism, and universal values.⁵⁰ The next administration has an early opportunity to reframe American engagement in the region on the basis of these values.

The next administration should also reassess the U.S. Department of State bureaus and other government agencies involved in strategic communications and values-related policy aimed at advancing a proactive message of support for the basic dignity and rights of individuals across the region. The current crisis response efforts to counter violent extremism need to be complemented by efforts to counter Sunni-Shia sectarianism and support freedoms of expression and religion.

Moreover, the State Department should prioritize these issues in its discussions with partners in the Middle East. Particularly egregious cases should be brought up persistently in diplomatic interactions with governments such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Moreover, these issues should be a major part of the agendas for the next president's face-to-face conversations with heads of state in the region. The United States remains a key frame of reference for the Middle East, and the next administration should leverage this position to push for greater respect for the freedoms of expression and belief.

However, the United States will need to continue to work with partners who do not share its values in order to resolve regional security crises such as the civil wars in Syria and Yemen. Productive relationships with governments such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, or with countries that are backsliding from democracy such as Egypt and Turkey, present an important path to easing humanitarian suffering. But the United States should not let this strategic imperative be the sole determinant of its policy. The next administration ought to be able to pursue both interests and values at the same time.

- **Work toward a Helsinki-style regional security conference that links basic human rights to security and sovereignty.** In the mid-1970s, the United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective European allies came together in Helsinki to forge a regional security agreement that committed all parties to respect existing borders and basic human rights.⁵¹ Such a security conference does not appear likely in today's Middle East, but the next U.S. administration should begin to lay the foundation for such an agreement by 2025. Regional states and outside powers should all agree to respect basic human rights and freedoms, as well as national borders and sovereignty. In particular, they should also forswear support for proxies and terrorists that have done so much damage to regional and global security.

Organized around the principles of peace, prosperity, and progress in the Middle East, this security conference would create a normative framework for regional security that acknowledges the inviolability of borders between states and the human rights of those living within them. Crucially, this framework should also include commitments to refrain from destabilizing regional states through proxy forces, terrorism, or other subversive means. This accord would offer Middle Eastern signatories security reassurance from the United States and its allies in exchange for agreement on core principles of respect for borders and the rights inherent to nation-state sovereignty; refraining from the threat or use of force, subversion, and support for terrorism; cooperation in the fields of economics, science, and the environment; and respect for universal human rights and freedoms.

Initiative 2: Shift U.S. security assistance and cooperation to foster greater regional security cooperation and integration

The United States remains deeply engaged in military and intelligence cooperation in the Middle East. No other country from outside the region has the depth and breadth of security networks in the region. The next U.S. president will inherit a Middle East still heavily dependent on the security umbrella provided by the United States. (see Figure 5 on page 18) The United States should take advantage of this new assertiveness on security issues to channel the region's energies in a constructive direction.

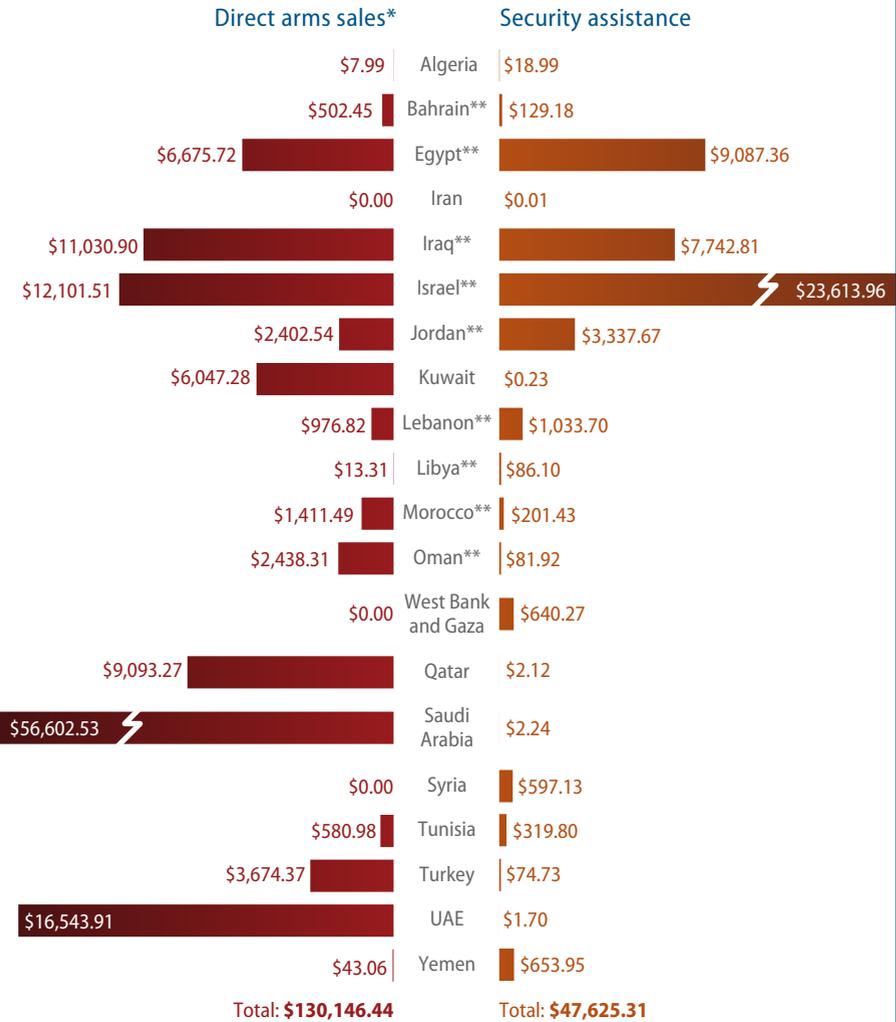
The next U.S. administration should aim to shift America's security role in the Middle East from that of a security guarantor to that of a strategic integrator—helping integrate and upgrade the capacities of regional partners on all elements of security. This would entail more measures that help enhance the interoperability of weapons systems, such as missile defense between countries in the region, and taking these steps in a way that aims to build a more sustainable regional security architecture and opens new pathways for confidence-building measures on the security front. Key partners in the region already engage in limited security cooperation through U.S.-sponsored mechanisms such as the Combined Maritime Forces, which patrol the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, the Obama administration has committed to help Gulf Cooperation Council states build a regional missile defense system and deepen cooperation between their special operations units.⁵²

The next U.S. administration should build upon efforts by the past two administrations to foster greater regional security cooperation, such as the wide-ranging coalition to defeat the Islamic State and the efforts begun by President Obama and the GCC countries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman—at Camp David in 2015.⁵³ The next administration should leverage these initiatives to forge a more cohesive regional security architecture, with two main steps:

- **Help regional partners create a new Middle East stabilization force.** In recent years, regional powers have demonstrated an increasing military assertiveness in response to immediate threats. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi proposed the creation of a joint Arab stabilization force in spring 2015,⁵⁴ an idea that has not yet been implemented.

FIGURE 6

U.S. arms sales and security assistance to the Middle East in millions of dollars, 2009–2015



* Countries receive Foreign Military Financing grants and loans to assist with acquiring U.S.-produced weapons and defense equipment, defense services, and military training.

** This reflects Foreign Military Sales only.

Sources: Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Historical Facts Book" (2015), available at http://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/historical_facts_book_-_30_september_2015.pdf; Security Assistance Monitor, "Data: Military And Police Aid (Countries)," available at http://securityassistance.org/data/country/military/country/2009/2015/is_all/Middle%20East (last accessed September 2016).

Moving forward, the United States should help its regional partners slowly but steadily build a Middle East stabilization force that can help manage threats to regional peace and security. First and foremost, a multilateral force would develop the set of capabilities needed to undertake peacekeeping missions in the region. It would be expected to play a role in guaranteeing political settlements designed to end the civil wars raging across the Middle East and North Africa. But it would also serve as a mechanism for conducting joint training, developing greater interoperability, and deepening respect for international laws and norms across militaries.

The multinational force could be headquartered in Egypt, home to the region's largest military. Other participants would include key regional military powers with whom the United States has active and deep security relationships, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and the UAE. These countries would contribute troops based on their capacity and skill sets. The United States and other Western allies would help train and equip troops from these countries to participate in peacekeeping and stabilization along the lines of Jordan's King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center.⁵⁵ The United States would also provide the force with unique enablers—including strategic airlift, intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance, and logistical support.

The Middle East stabilization force would deploy under the authority of a regional organization such as the Arab League or the United Nations consistent with the U.N. charter. The mechanisms to create and coordinate such a force could also help provide an entry point for desperately needed security-sector reform, including training in respect for human rights, civilian protection, and the laws of war. While the United States should remain appropriately measured and modest at its inception, over time, this force could expand from peacekeeping to more ambitious missions as it channels growing regional assertiveness in a positive and constructive direction.

TABLE 1
Active-duty Military Strengths of Regional States

Country	Population*	GDP, in billions of dollars	Active-duty personnel
Egypt	91,508,084	\$330.78	438,500
Iran	79,109,272	\$425.33	523,000
Turkey	78,665,830	\$718.22	510,600
Algeria	39,666,519	\$166.84	130,000
Iraq*	36,423,395	\$168.61	64,000
Morocco	34,377,511	\$100.36	195,800
Saudi Arabia**	31,540,372	\$646	127,000
Yemen*	26,832,215	\$35.96	10,000-20,000
Syria***	18,502,413	N/A	130,500
Tunisia	11,107,800	\$43.02	35,800
UAE	9,156,963	\$370.29	63,000
Israel	8,380,400	\$296.08	176,500
Jordan	7,594,547	\$37.52	100,500
Libya*	6,278,438	\$29.15	N/A
Lebanon	5,850,743	\$47.10	60,000
Oman	4,490,541	\$70.26	42,600
Palestinian Authority	4,422,143	\$12.68	4,200
Kuwait	3,892,115	\$112.81	15,500
Qatar	2,235,355	\$166.91	11,800
Bahrain	1,377,237	\$32.22	8,200

* Civil war states, not including militias, insurgents, or other irregular forces

** Does not include the Saudi Arabian National Guard

*** Includes migrant laborers, expatriates, and other foreign nationals

Sources: Data on GDP from The World Bank, "Gross domestic product 2015" (2016), available at <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>. Data on population from The World Bank, "Population, total," available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?view=chart> (last accessed September 2016). Data on military personnel from International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Military Balance 2016" (2016), available at <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/military%20balance/issues/the-military-balance-2016-d6c9>.

- **Increase security integration within the region and with the rest of the world.** Within the region, persistent effort will be required to coax countries toward greater integration, building on existing frameworks. The United States should seek greater security integration within the GCC, between the GCC and other Arab nations, and with outside powers. Greater GCC interoperability—long promised but little delivered—represents an important jumping-off point in administration efforts to encourage the region’s countries to take greater responsibility for their own security. The United States could also propose bringing Jordan and Morocco into the existing U.S.-GCC special operations integration initiative. In addition, the United States should aim to bring in European and Asian allies along the lines of the Combined Maritime Forces model, which has patrolled the seas around the Arabian Peninsula over the past 15 years.⁵⁶

NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, an effort launched with several countries in the region in 2004 and reaffirmed at numerous NATO summits since then,⁵⁷ offers another pathway for enhancing military and security cooperation between the countries of the region.

Initiative 3: Focus economic statecraft and engagement to encourage inclusive growth and regional cooperation

The United States should continue the shift of its economic statecraft away from large and costly bilateral development assistance programs and toward new tools aimed at promoting economic reform, competition, and integration using public-private partnerships and new financing mechanisms. These tools will be essential for a strategic rebalance of overall U.S. engagement in the Middle East and for increasing the chances of success for that engagement.

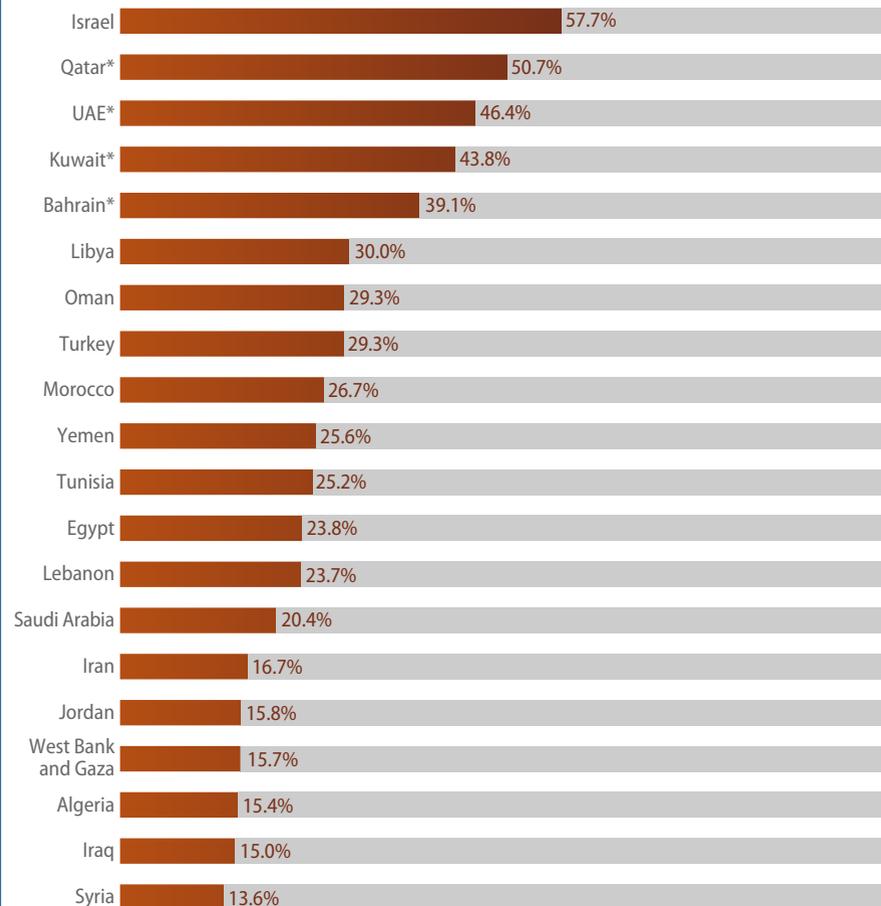
Countries in the region face both major economic challenges and opportunities in the coming decade, including:

- A massive postconflict reconstruction challenge in multiple countries that have faced conflict over the past 15 years
- Stagnant state-driven economies that actively limit private-sector growth, inhibit entrepreneurship, and fail to create jobs and inclusive prosperity
- Outmoded social contracts, reliant on inefficient subsidies and public-sector employment as a substitute for universal social insurance programs

- Extreme dependency on energy exports and external financial assistance
- Endemic corruption abetted by weak governance and rule of law
- Nascent efforts to reform social contracts and economies in key countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt
- A young, working-age population with a strong desire for employment and economic opportunities

FIGURE 7
Female labor force participation rate, 2014

Share of working female population ages 15 and older



* Statistics are likely skewed by large expatriate populations.
The World Bank, "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)," available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS> (last accessed September 2016).

On the economic statecraft front, the United States should take the following steps:

- **Work with global partners to create a new multilateral Reconstruction Bank for the Middle East.** The long-term costs of rebuilding Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya will require hundreds of billions of dollars of investment and effort. Over the next decade, these efforts will also present an opportunity for economic growth in the region.⁵⁸

After 15 years, tens of billions of dollars spent,⁵⁹ and mixed results at best, Americans are understandably wary of talk of postconflict reconstruction in the Middle East.⁶⁰ Instead of directly financing a regional Marshall Plan with taxpayer dollars, the next administration should launch a marshalling plan to pull together sufficient funding to rebuild regional societies after their civil wars have ended. Indeed, the World Bank has already announced the creation of special bonds to finance reconstruction and recovery projects.⁶¹ The next U.S. administration should seek a lead role in this reconstruction finance initiative, bringing other multinational financial institutions on board, such as the African Development Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In addition, ensuring that wealthy partners in the Gulf contribute their fair share to reconstruction and humanitarian relief should be a major diplomatic goal.⁶² Despite lower revenues from lower energy prices, the region still has money that can be put to good use rebuilding economies shattered by civil war.

This multilateral effort fundamentally differs from the Deauville Partnership launched in 2011. The overall regional context has changed dramatically over the past five years. Deauville reflected a moment of optimism about the future political course of the region and aimed to provide economic support to countries that had recently emerged from decades of dictatorship. Today, however, the central economic challenge in the Middle East has become rebuilding societies destroyed by civil war. Rather than supporting political transitions, the overarching goal of the Reconstruction Bank will be to pull together financing from across the region and around the world to support the stabilization and reconstruction of countries devastated by internal conflict.

These joint reconstruction efforts will require prioritized planning, impartial distribution, technical implementation, and transparency in monitoring. This bank cannot stop with donor pledges or contributions—it needs to follow through with strong cooperation in implementation and delivery for it to have a

chance at some success. The region's civil wars will eventually end. The United States and others need to start planning now for how to rebuild, shape, and support the political orders that emerge after conflict.

- **Provide technical help and expertise to encourage countries working to devise new social contracts and increase economic opportunity.** In recent years, some governments in the region have begun to recognize that elements of their social contracts are no longer tenable. Saudi Arabia's new leaders, for instance, recently approved an economic reform program that reduces subsidies to individuals and partially privatizes the state oil company.⁶³ The UAE plans to levy a value-added tax starting in 2018, the first of its kind in the Gulf.⁶⁴ Outside the Gulf, the Sisi government in Egypt has introduced reforms to the country's food and energy subsidies.⁶⁵

It will be important for the next administration to make sure that the states in the region actually follow through on their economic reform plans. The Gulf states, for instance, failed to implement plans made after the 2008 global financial crash to impose income and value-added taxes.⁶⁶ Accordingly, the next administration should task the State Department with tracking reform processes and offering periodic bilateral assistance to key countries that have announced reform plans. The State Department could also organize an international support group drawn from the G-7 or G-20 and international financial institutions to offer advice to Gulf partners as they undertake economic reform programs. If implemented fully and effectively, these reforms have the potential to create the economic and social opportunities that rising generations across the region expect.

One flashpoint that would benefit from continued U.S. economic statecraft is the situation in the Palestinian territories. Today, the outlook for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority remains bleak. Therefore, the next U.S. administration should take steps to sustain a two-state solution until a resumption of talks becomes politically feasible. Key security, governance, and economic challenges must be addressed to keep that window open. Specifically, the next administration should take steps to strengthen Palestinian security institutions and improve the Palestinian economy—both essential ingredients of a two-state solution. CAP conducted an in-depth analysis of the Palestinian economy and offered detailed recommendations for U.S. policy in the recently

released report “Strengthening the Palestinian Economy to Keep a Two-State Solution Viable.”⁶⁷ Palestinian economic growth is not a substitute for political progress but instead part of an effort to give Palestinians the tangible opportunity to take charge of their own livelihoods and thereby sustain their aspirations of statehood.

- **Encourage greater integration of the region’s economies.** Achieving greater regional and global economic integration will require countries in the Middle East to build transnational networks for transportation, trade, and commerce between states of the region. Only 10 percent of the regional country exports go to other countries in the Middle East.⁶⁸ Moreover, the World Bank estimates that the lack of economic integration within the Middle East costs the region between 1 percent and 2 percent of gross domestic product growth each year.⁶⁹ That growth would go a long way toward addressing the region’s social and economic challenges, including employment and opportunities for young people.

Rather than pushing additional trade liberalization agreements, the next administration’s State Department should encourage the GCC states to invest in trade-enhancing infrastructure in neighboring countries. Strengthening the physical transportation infrastructure of regional countries, for instance, will likely do more to bring down trade costs than removal of tariffs and other legal barriers.⁷⁰ The United States can sweeten the pot for regional investors by including critical infrastructure projects in its political-economic compacts with key partners. Relevant U.S. government agencies should also work with regional development banks to scout out and fund especially beneficial infrastructure projects.

FIGURE 8

The Middle East’s share of global trade



Note: Data on the West Bank and Gaza are not available.
 Source: World Trade Organization, “Trade Profiles 2015” (2015), available at https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/trade_profiles15_e.pdf.

Conclusion

The next U.S. president should strike a new balance that addresses America's strategic priorities in the Middle East at a cost acceptable to the American people. This new balance, detailed in this report, draws lessons from both President George W. Bush's overreach and President Obama's corrective restraint to meet the demands of a new moment in the region. It is a balance that properly combines targeted engagement on the diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation fronts, with clear restraint at the level of direct military action.

The Obama administration points to some achievements in the region without large-scale American military intervention on the ground, including, most importantly, a nuclear deal with Iran that peacefully addresses the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran for many years to come. While the agreement closed off the worst avenues for escalation between Iran and its Arab adversaries, however, it did not produce a stable equilibrium that would allow for strategic competition free of the proxy battles and sectarian bloodshed that have ravaged the region. Accordingly, the next U.S. administration needs to intensify diplomatic outreach with its longstanding partners in the region—including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Tunisia—in an effort to set a new tone and influence their actions within their own borders and in the region.

Moreover, advancing American leadership in the Middle East also requires greater outreach at home. The current political environment is inauspicious for sustaining the investments that U.S. leadership in the region will require. Many conservatives in America today no longer follow the lead of President Bush and his Freedom Agenda, instead viewing the Middle East and its people as a threat to be dealt with by any means necessary. On the left, many progressives appear inclined toward a disengagement born of fatalism or inward focus. Such frustrations and concerns are understandable given the challenges that have confronted U.S. policy over the past 15 years. Acknowledging that other regions of the world also demand increased investment, CAP believes that U.S. leadership in the Middle East remains vital to the security of the American people and must be sustained and updated for the years ahead.

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Endnotes

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