

Ten Proposals on the Middle East for the New US Administration

BY RUSSELL BERMAN AND CHARLES HILL

The new administration will inherit a Middle East foreign policy in tatters. The aspirations of President Obama's Cairo speech of 2009 have not been met. Instead, failed states proliferate, non-state actors amplify disorder, and the stable rulers that remain rely on shaky legitimacy. The paradigm of a system of nation-states may be disappearing before our eyes.

The contradictions of American foreign policy are most salient with regard to Syria and Iran. While Washington has prioritized a reconciliation with Iran, Tehran continues on a path of unmodified belligerence toward the United States. Meanwhile, Bashar al-Assad, Iran's puppet in Damascus, remains comfortably in power, despite the president's insistence that he depart.

The United States has succeeded neither in realizing its values of democratization and human rights in the region nor in pursuing its security interests: on the contrary, the relations with our traditional allies—Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—have all suffered. ISIS remains a threat throughout the region and beyond, while a revisionist Russia has taken advantage of the contraction of American power by laying claim to an ever-larger role. In the wake of American inaction, a human catastrophe has unfolded.

In December 2016, the Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order of the Hoover Institution convened a group of distinguished experts to discuss the challenges to American foreign policy in the Middle East, as the administration in Washington changes. These proposals represent a synthesis of key aspects of the discussion.

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1. As a region, the broad Middle East remains vital to US national interest. Because of its importance, the United States cannot disengage from it. It is not an irrelevant space that can be abandoned to our adversaries or to the chaos of state failure. The region is on the edge of nuclear weapons proliferation. It is a major incubator of international terrorism and a source of instability for our European allies, particularly through mass emigration. In addition, the Middle East includes trade routes crucial to international trade, and it is the site of key oil and gas resources that will remain central to the global economy for decades at least, no matter how energy and environmental policies develop. The United States must reaffirm its commitment to the region and our role in it.

2. The United States needs to develop and articulate a strategic vision that defines its desired political outcomes in the region. During the Obama administration, however, the United States knowingly has been carrying out a strategy of reducing its role and influence in the Middle East. Our reliability and credibility have declined, as we have stayed engaged but never sufficiently or steadily to the point of being successful on any significant issue, let alone in reaching ultimate strategic goals. Because of the lack of a clear strategy—other than that of withdrawal—political decisions in recent years have been inconsistent, and a focus on tactical and operational issues has obscured the determination of long-term goals and their achievement. Yet contrary to some recent claims, the American public favors a strong US role in the world. In order to succeed, American policy must articulate our political ends and distinguish between them and the means deployed to attain them.

3. US strategy must be defined above all in terms of US national interests. Recognition of global challenges and the parameters of international organizations can play into the understanding and pursuit of those interests, but a clear prioritization of national interest over other concerns is indispensable. A subordination of national interest to alternative concerns, globalist or otherwise, is politically unsustainable and, by definition, inconsistent with vital US goals. The definition of national interest has to take into account our security, our economy, and our values.

4. Iran and Russia, powers adversarial to the United States, perceive an interest in cooperating strategically with each other militarily, politically, and economically. China has begun to probe the region for opportunities serving its interests.

The IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) has de facto become an Iranian expeditionary force for invading strategic Arab spaces, countering many decades of US support for Arab states. The central regional conflict is Shia Iran versus Sunni Saudi Arabia, with Iran far ahead in both strategic and tactical categories. Iran and Russia are pursuing strategies to diminish and eliminate US influence in the Middle East. Because of vital interests in the region, US strategy must be designed to roll back Iranian and Russian ambitions in the region. This implies the imperative of opposing Iranian client ambitions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

5. Iran is a de facto Caliphate without declaring itself to be such. It is both a recognized legitimate state in the established international state system and a dedicated religious-ideological enemy of the established world order; it continues to play successfully on one side or the other as best suits its interests on any given issue. The US government does not appear to be aware of this double game, or simply accepts it. Iran is not a polity of moderates and hard-liners; it is a revolutionary theocracy which controls and makes use of governmental and diplomatic functions in order to appear to a deceived outside world as a legitimate regime. The JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) is the linchpin of US policy. It emerged as a one-sided “deal” under which the United States has provided legitimacy and substantial support for the regime, while leaving the regime free to take steps that exacerbate the Arab world’s instability and to employ a variety of anti-US acts and statements which are seen around the region as humiliations to the Americans. The net result of the JCPOA as it proceeds is to foster Iran’s rise to regional hegemon. While the JCPOA has suspended a part of Iran’s nuclear weapons program for a few years, it is seen from within the Iranian hierarchy as providing it with needed time to advance its centrifuge capability and to provide the United States with a face-saving time frame during which to extricate itself from the region. Yet US interests require ongoing presence in the region. A purported aim of the JCPOA—to find and to bolster so-called moderates in Tehran—is an illusion. Relations with Iran should henceforth be based on a clear recognition of the consistently hostile character of the regime. The unraveling of the JCPOA, already under way in the last months of the Obama administration, requires, secondarily, that US diplomacy make clear to the Europeans, partners in the JCPOA, that international security interests outweigh the prospects of commercial opportunities in the Iranian market.



6. For all its endemic weaknesses as a state, Russia has used its military power to replace the United States as the most employable potent and credible outside force in the region. Current US trends toward cooperating with Russia and Assad's military operations (nominally) against the Islamic State (Daesh), while declaring American opposition to Putin's international actions and ambitions—and simultaneously enabling Iran's rise to hegemony—amount to a web of contradictions. If the United States attempts to recover some of the influence it has lost over the past several years, it is likely to find itself nearly checkmated from several directions. Russia can become a significant structural obstacle to the pursuit of US interests and could develop substantial relations with traditional US allies Egypt and Turkey, reducing or possibly displacing US influence.

US strategy should limit Russian power by preventing the stabilization of the Assad regime as a Russian client state. The Syrian state should, however, be enabled to survive within its formal borders. This requires some negotiated understandings on the need for autonomous regions, so that the several distinctive communities within Syria may be able to coexist in semi-independence. It is necessary to avoid the perpetual chaos and warfare that would follow any evaporation of Syrian statehood. Ultimately, Assad will have to hand over power to a newly designed constitutional polity. Rather than stand by the side, the United States has to play a defining role in this process.

7. Islam is not the enemy. The enemy is jihadi Islamism. The United States has to clarify this distinction in order not to be misperceived as an enemy of Islam. Clarity on this point is a precondition for a reaffirmation of traditional US support for Arab regimes. Furthermore, the JCPOA, understood in the region as proof of an American tilt toward Shia Iran, has left the impression that the United States is hostile to Sunni Islam. A correction is required, in particular by repairing and strengthening relations with the Sunni powers, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Similarly, relations with Israel need reaffirmation and strengthening. Israel is the only strong partner for the United States in the region, and this should be recognized and appreciated by Washington. A crucial result of the regional upheavals of the past few years has been the development of productive working relationships between parts of the Sunni Arab world and Israel. The United States should encourage this emerging cooperation and not, by its own actions regarding the issues of Jerusalem or settlements, in effect force the Arab states to turn against Israel and return to the rigid "rejectionist" positions of the past.

8. ISIS is a threat to regional stability. Its continued existence, whether in its territorial “Caliphate” in Syria or in its worldwide terrorist activities, has been used by Iran as a recruiting tool for drawing Shia Islam under its sway and therefore expanding its power. Yet the perception of a primary American focus on combatting ISIS has obscured the greater threat of Iran. US strategy, especially in Syria and Iraq, needs to rebalance these concerns. The US campaign against ISIS should not be pursued in ways that effectively strengthen the Assad regime to the benefit of its Iranian and Russian supporters. The perception of an American pro-Shia bias has fueled Sunni radicalization. A visible American response to Iranian aggression, most likely in the Gulf, is needed in order to reduce the attraction of ISIS by undermining its claim that the United States favors Iran.

9. US strength depends on military force, but also on the credibility of our values through the promotion of democratic institutions. The United States should encourage democratic reforms and support elements of civil society that pursue them. At the same time the United States should recognize that it must not impose its values in ways that undermine the stability of friendly regimes. Support for the development of democratic institutions needs to be balanced by the pragmatic concerns for alliances in a diverse world.

10. Terrorism is a scourge of contemporary society, in the Middle East, in the West, and in the rest of the world. Of particular concern is the potential for large-scale attacks, another 9/11 or worse, that would lead to public calls for dramatic political consequences, such as severe restrictions on civil liberties. In order to forestall such events, expansive counterterrorism intelligence is necessary. In fact, US counterterrorism efforts have been impressively successful. They have been justified as necessary for the defense of the American Homeland; but their success has also been misused as grounds for the United States to reduce its traditional leadership role in the maintenance of international peace and security, along with the counterinsurgency and “nation-building” efforts that the latter requires. Thus, one essential part of US grand strategy, counterterrorism, has been used to justify abandoning another essential part of grand strategy, which is the indispensability of an American commitment to world order. In the context of a renewed emphasis on the responsibilities of allied powers, a clear reaffirmation of the primacy of the United States in preserving international order is needed.





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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

For more information on the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, visit <http://www.hoover.org/researchteams/islamism>