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U.S. Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Pumping Air into a Punctured Tire

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	2
U.S. Interests Revisited	3
The State of the Region	5
One Region: Two Games	6
Asymmetric Capabilities	8
Bandwagoning vs Clustering	10
U.S. Policy doesn't Add Up	11
Conclusion	12



Abstract

Theorizing the future of the Arab Gulf states and the broader Middle East requires a proper assessment of the state of power distribution in the region. Is there a new balance of power emerging in the Middle East, or is the distribution of power heading in a more dangerous direction?

This paper argues that a traditional, realist, balance of power concept is outdated given the realities of the Middle East today. This is because the nature of the competition between the major regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran is not in direct competition but rather indirect rivalry through proxy engagement in the states currently or previously ravaged by civil war (Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq). Because of these civil wars and the proxy involvement fueling them, the Middle East has become a degraded state system, not a state-centric system envisioned by balance of power theory. Winners and losers in this rivalry will be determined more by coalitional and hybrid warfare capabilities, and less by conventional military power indicators. Furthermore, since the greatest danger to the region is posed by this proxy competition in the civil war zones is unintended escalation, collective security and regional stability should be the endgames.

The U.S. not only has interests at the national level with allies Saudi Arabia and Israel but also at the regional level. Washington seems intent on bringing Iran to its knees and back to the negotiation table by re-imposing sanctions and using its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel as cudgels to this end. Its support for the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), otherwise known as the “Arab NATO” is part of this initiative. This response is likely to further escalate tensions in the region by incentivizing Iran and Russia to deepen their ties, likely undermining US interests in regional stability. This paper suggests instead a more balanced and nuanced approach that works towards an internationally supported collective security framework.



Introduction

U.S. foreign policy decision-making regarding the Middle East appears to take place in a strategy free zone.⁽¹⁾ There is scant debate about U.S. vital interests in this tumultuous region, and how they may have changed since the Cold War ended nearly three decades ago, and how they have been altered since Russia inserted itself into the Syrian civil war in 2015. An appropriate discussion would be whether given the current state of affairs in the Middle East the U.S. should define its primary interest to be the overall health and stability of the region, and whether the Trump administration tipping the scales even further towards Israel and Saudi Arabia advances or betrays that interest? Observers would be forgiven for concluding that Washington sees these alliances as ends in themselves, rather than also viewing them as means towards broader strategic interests the United States has in the region. Another aspect of this debate should question how Washington's current hostile stance towards Iran enhances or undermines the strategic interests of the United States.

Moreover, the discourse about U.S. foreign policy is oddly detached from any clear analysis of the regional dynamics of the Middle East. Without a clearly defined picture of the state of politics and power dynamics in the region or a proper analysis of the Middle East, any discussion of how best to advance U.S. interests is likely to be feckless and policy decisions could end up reckless.

The primary argument this paper develops is that current U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East neither advances U.S. strategic interests nor properly considers the emerging power dynamics of the region. In previous decades it made sense for the United States to express its interests in terms of U.S. allies and adversaries. During the Cold War, the loss or gain of specific allies directly affected U.S. interests and ability to contain the Soviet Union. The power dynamics of the region were a given, as they largely reflected the global Cold War structure. But today, the power dynamics of the Middle East are far from given and in fact are up for grabs. Because of this, the interests of the United States are tied not just to individual states as allies or adversaries, but also to the stability of the region. Alliances, therefore, should not be thought of as ends in themselves, but also as means towards serving this broader strategic interest.

This argument will be advanced by demonstrating how current U.S. policy assumes that the Middle East is still a balance of power system, where perceived or real power imbalances can be redressed by Washington putting its thumb on the power distribution scale.⁽²⁾ However, the region is not currently defined by strong states, but rather a degraded state system where broken states engulfed in civil wars are affecting and arguably destroying the regional political order.

This means that there are two power games taking place simultaneously in the Middle East today. The first is interstate competition where strong states in the region directly vie for power against one another. This game can be seen at play most prominently between Israel and Iran, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and more recently between Turkey and Saudi Arabia. But the second and most prevalent

¹ See Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iraq, Iran, the Gulf, Turkey, and the Future: The Meaningless Debate over the Trump Strategy in Syria", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, January 7th, 2019, for the quote by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis to this effect.

² This argument is supported in John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy" in *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2016 issue).

game today is intrastate competition, where these same regional powers compete indirectly within the countries embroiled in civil war through their respective proxies. It will be argued that current U.S. policy considers the first interstate, but not the second intrastate, game. While the United States and Saudi Arabia may be playing a balance of power, interstate game, Iran is playing the intrastate game amidst a broken regional order. Given this reality, the harder the United States pushes against Iran, the greater the incentive for Tehran to deepen its intrastate game in the civil war zones, further undermining U.S. regional interests in stability.

U.S. Interests Revisited

The north star of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East should be vital strategic interests. Clarity about U.S. interests should indicate to policymakers what's at stake for the United States in this vital, albeit troubled, region and should offer them and others a scale to measure the success or failure of policy. Policy that is disconnected from or contrary to vital interests is likely to lead to strategic failure and disaster for the United States in the Middle East.

But there has been little agreement or even high-level discussion about what is at stake for the U.S. in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. In fact, how the United States perceives its interests in the Middle East has largely been a holdover from the Cold War when interests centered around individual states and how they played into the Soviet containment calculus.

Regional dynamics during the Cold War weren't really a concern, as the Middle East to a large degree took on the shape of the bipolar global order.⁽³⁾ The region was bifurcated into U.S. and Soviet camps, and beyond that there was little focus on questions about the regional order, at least not until the Iranian revolution in 1979. Also, during the Cold War there was less a concern about regional security and more of a focus on the security of individual countries, lest country instability be exploited by the Soviet Union. The CIA orchestrated coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 was motivated by a fear of this happening.⁽⁴⁾ During that era, alliances were the means by which containment of the Soviet Union was achieved, and so events that threatened to disrupt those alliances were thought to directly imperil U.S. interests.

But after the Cold War and particularly starting with the 2011 Arab Spring, there was a largely unrecognized shift in U.S. interests from states to the broader region. This isn't to suggest that alliances with states became unimportant. There is nothing intrinsically problematic with framing interests around U.S. allies. Support for Saudi Arabia to protect the free flow of oil and to advance counterterrorism, and support for Israel to ensure its survival, have been pillars of U.S. foreign policy for decades and are still tenable today.⁽⁵⁾

3 See Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd Edition (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1971) for a discussion of how during the Cold War between the superpowers a similar Arab Cold War developed, defined rivalry between Soviet backed Egypt and U.S. backed Saudi Arabia.

4 See Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: an American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, 2nd Edition (Wiley: New York, 2008).

5 "U.S. Interests in the Middle East" in *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 36:277, 2014

But as the region transitioned from a reasonably stable Cold War era system to a region undergoing profound transformation and struggling with its own structural dynamics, an overriding interest for the United States became regional stability. In fact, it would be fair to say that stability of the region should now be elevated to the status of a vital interest of the United States, equal to or even greater than interests pertaining to U.S. allies and adversaries in the Middle East.

The logic of this is that during the Cold War there were only a handful of incidents when events in the region threatened to blowback to the United States or Soviet Union or draw the two superpowers into open conflict.⁽⁶⁾ Yet today instability that originates in the Middle East quickly globalizes. Terror attacks, and the specter of future terrorist incidents, have roiled Europe and the United States. Moreover, refugee flows from the civil war zones of the Middle East have changed the political discourse in Europe and arguably the United States, contributing to forces of populism being unleashed. The potential for instability in the Middle East to upend the international order makes regional stability a core U.S. interest. In other words, U.S. interests reside, not merely at the state level, but also at the regional level.

The question is, how does this interest at the regional level relate to the other more state-based U.S. interests in the Middle East? Regional stability benefits all states in the region, but particularly U.S. allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. While they are mired in the conflict-trap the region has become, and therefore may be reluctant promoters of stabilization activities in the Middle East, nonetheless they can only thrive economically and be secure in a stable region.⁽⁷⁾ The interests the United States has in the free flow of oil is also complemented by the regional stability interest. Higher prices and even supply disruptions could occur from further regional instability. Some might say that with the United States largely energy independent, secure energy supplies from the Middle East no longer represent a core U.S. interest. But the fact that U.S. European allies are still dependent on Middle Eastern oil and gas means that this region still has importance to the United States when it comes to energy.

Another burning question is, where does the imperative of regional stability leave the issue of U.S. interests towards Iran? Iran certainly remains a policy conundrum for the United States. Its presence in Syria alongside Hezbollah poses a challenge to Israeli security interests. Having extended its influence into the Arab capitals of Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sana'a, Iran also poses a challenge to Saudi Arabia's interests in the broader Arab world. Moreover, Tehran has become more adversarial towards the United States since Donald Trump's peremptory and provocative withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018.

But Iran isn't the new Soviet Union and doesn't represent a global threat. Iran, like the other major powers in the Middle East, has been a destabilizing influence in the current regional disorder. But Iran's strategic advantage comes from its effectiveness in operating within the vulnerable civil war zones in the Arab World, taking advantage of state failure. Working towards regional stability would

6 The exception to this rule was the 1973 war between Israel, Egypt and Syria, where U.S. President Nixon elevated the nuclear alert status to DEFCON III, showing the potential for the war to provoke conflict between the superpowers. See Victor Israëlian, "Nuclear Showdown as Nixon Slept", *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November, 1993

7 See Ross Harrison, "Regionalism in the Middle East: An Impossible Dream" in *Orient* (Berlin) 1 / 2018 for an analysis of why states caught in the conflict trap don't cooperate on behalf of regional interests.



reduce Iran's opportunities and temptations to meddle in this way. But Iran is in fact a stakeholder in, and would benefit from, a more stable region. Also, Iran will ultimately be necessary in stabilizing the region. Defining U.S. interests as "pushing back against Iran" begs the question of whether this supports or undermines the overarching U.S. interest in regional stability and security.⁽⁸⁾

The State of the Region

It is difficult to articulate, let alone advance, U.S. interests in a Middle East undergoing profound turmoil and transformation. Orienting and grounding U.S. interests in a region where the distribution of power is up for grabs is challenging. The stakes for the United States very much depend on how the current jockeying for power plays out.

But even under conditions of instability and uncertainty, it is important for policymakers to grapple with regional dynamics and how they affect U.S. interests.⁽⁹⁾ U.S. policymakers appear to be stuck in the past, assuming that the Middle East is still a state-centric, balance of power region. The balance of power notion comes from the realist tradition of international relations, where states are power maximizing, interest seeking, entities. According to this kind of zero-sum framework, cooperation among states isn't natural or even rational, but only comes about under conditions when there is a balance of power.⁽¹⁰⁾ But contrary to the way U.S. policymakers treat the notion of balance of power, it was never designed to be an ideology or prescription. Rather, along with other realist-based approaches, it was intended to provide insights into the behavior of states and regions, particularly in strong state-centric systems. But policymakers in Washington have over the decades tended to treat balance of power theory as a truism that works for all regional structures, including the current Middle East regional system, and therefore an automatic guide to policy.

During the Cold War, the Middle East was in fact a balance of power system, with allies of the United States and Soviet Union counterpoised against one another. But it was an artificial system, in that it reflected the structure created by the two superpowers rather than the indigenous power dynamics of the region. Malcom Kerr wrote about this in the 1970s, arguing that the region in the 1950s and 1960s was defined by the struggle between Soviet backed Egypt, led by Gamal Abd al-Nasir, and its U.S. backed Arab rivals, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.⁽¹¹⁾

Even after the Cold War ended, the United States continued to treat the Middle East as a balance of power system. Being the sole remaining superpower, the United States was unfettered in trying to influence and later shape that balance of power in what was still a state-centric region. During the

8 See "Trump, Pompeo Push for Harder Stance on Iran", *Radio Farda* (U.S. Government Funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) July 12th, 2018.

9 See Patrick Tyler *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East from the Cold War to the War on Terror*; (Farrar Straus Giroux: New York) Prologue

10 See Kenneth N. Waltz "Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power" (Chapter 5) In Robert E. Keohane (editor), *Neorealism and its Critics*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986).

11 Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir and his Rivals, 1958-1970*, 3rd Edition (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1971)

Clinton Administration, the United States pursued a policy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq.⁽¹²⁾ Even though Iraq had been hobbled by United Nations (UN) sanctions and the no-fly zones imposed by the U.S., U.K. and France after the first Gulf War of 1990-1, there was still a perception that Saddam Hussein had to be contained and counterbalanced by a U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.⁽¹³⁾ The same U.S. military presence, plus a redoubling of support for allies Saudi Arabia and Israel, were aimed at containing Iran, which along with Syria and Hezbollah, had positioned itself as a resistance front against the United States and its allies.

But as the region later succumbed to the Arab Spring and fell prey to civil war in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, it started to lose the properties of a state-centric, balance of power system and instead to take on the properties of a degraded state system, a condition unaccounted for by classical balance of power realists. Adding to the degradation of states in the Middle East, has been the rise of non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁽¹⁴⁾ U.S. policy has been slow to adapt to these current regional conditions that do not align with the notion of a balance of power.

One Region: Two Games

To demonstrate the transformation the Middle East has undergone, it is important to look more specifically at the properties of a balance of power system and compare this with the degraded state system in evidence today in the region. While there are balance of power characteristics to the Middle East, such as the rivalry between strong states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, much of the Arab region has been hollowed out by civil wars, where state sovereignty has been degraded and a security vacuum has been created.

One of the properties of a balance of power system is state centrality. For classical realist theorists, states are the primary actor in international affairs. According to this line of thinking, the Middle East consists of states vying with one another for power and paramountcy in an anarchic regional system. According to realist theory, these states increase their power relative to one another either by balancing internally via enhancements to their military strength or balancing externally through the formation of alliances with other states.⁽¹⁵⁾

Within a state-centric realist mindset, regions are highly pressurized systems, with states vying with one another for power and paramountcy. One state's power gain in this zero-sum game is likely to come at the expense of others. When healthy competition within such a system breaks down,

12 For a critical assessment of this policy, see Thomas W. Lippman "Critics want U.S. to reevaluate "Dual Containment" Policy on Iraq and Iran" in *The Washington Post*, December 7th, 1997.

13 F. Gregory Gause, "The Illogic of Dual Containment" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994.

14 Louise Fawcett, "Alliances and Regionalism in the Middle East" in Louise Fawcett (editor) *International Relations of the Middle East: 4th Edition* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016).

15 See William C. Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World" in G. John Ikenberry (editor) *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2002)



there is significant risk that open conflict in the form of interstate war will ensue. Wars occur in such anarchic systems if, while states are maximizing their power, they bump up against each other's competing interests.⁽¹⁶⁾

But the current conditions of the Middle East don't align with realist assumptions about jockeying for power directly with one another. In the degraded state system of the Middle East, there are two conflict games being played simultaneously. The first is the interstate conflict game described by classical realists and balance of power theory. As balance of power theory predicts, these states increase their internal capabilities and form external alliances in order to maximize power against and deter aggression from one another. Israel and Iran certainly exhibit this kind of direct interstate behavior through their open confrontations in Syria. And Saudi Arabia and Iran are certainly increasing their internal and external capabilities to deter one another. Happily, these two powers have thus far averted direct state-to-state conflict.

The second game is the intrastate game, which neither conforms with balance of power theory nor classical realism. Here strong states like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey aren't competing directly, but instead are advancing their causes through proxies in the civil war zones of Syria and Yemen, and in weakened states like Iraq and Lebanon, all of which contribute to the degraded state system the Middle East has become. In this game, the major powers in the Middle East are competing, not by seeking territorial gains vis-à-vis one another, but by vying for influence and paramountcy within the most vulnerable states in the region.

While Saudi Arabia seems reasonably confident in the interstate competitive rivalry, they are apoplectic about Iran's advantages in the intrastate game and its use of hybrid warfare capability.⁽¹⁷⁾ Riyadh's threat perception has it believing that Iran is taking over the four Arab capitals of Baghdad, Damascus, Sana'a, and Beirut. While the reality is that Iran doesn't exert complete control over these capitals, Tehran has taken advantage of the civil wars raging in these countries to expand its influence into the Arab heartland. While Iran isn't a regional hegemon using conventional capability to bully its rivals, it does have distinct advantages in the intrastate proxy war game that yield it disproportionate regional influence.

These two games, the interstate and intrastate rivalries, do intersect though, producing a destructive spiraling effect. Since Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members understand that they are disadvantaged in the intrastate, proxy war game, they have compensated for this by ramping up their conventional military capabilities and by fortifying their external alliances with the United States and even Israel. What this has done in turn is give Iran the incentive to hunker down further in the civil war zones of Syria and Yemen and extend its tentacles even deeper into Iraq.

¹⁶ See Kenneth N. Waltz "Structural Realism after the Cold War" in G. John Ikenberry (editor) *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2002)

¹⁷ See Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol 40 no 1 (2017) pp. 39-53

In other words, these two simultaneous games have turned the Middle East from a pressurized balance of power system into a degraded state system where power leaks out toxically into the region. The harder Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States push against Iran, the deeper Iran entrenches itself in its area of competitive advantage, which is in perpetuating conflict in the civil war zones. This creates a situation analogous to a tire with a puncture. Rather than Saudi and U.S. actions putting Iran under pressure, they prompt it to extend its influence further in the civil war zones, sowing further instability that leaks out into the region. Extending the tire analogy further, the harder Iran is pushed and cornered, the more instability leaks out from the civil war zones into the broader region.

Asymmetric Capabilities

Another property of a balance of power system envisioned by classical realists is that capabilities among states are roughly symmetrical. There are debates about this question of capability among realists, but there seems to be agreement that a feature of states as power maximizing, competing entities is that they tend to emulate each other's capabilities.⁽¹⁸⁾ In other words, in a balance of power system states organize themselves as mirror images of one another in order to compete most effectively. This is exemplified by the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Competition was symmetrical in that both superpowers used a nuclear weapons capability as a deterrent and organized their conventional military capabilities in a similar way, each having army, naval and air force power.

While this symmetry of capabilities among states was a feature of the Middle East during much of the Cold War, in the degraded state system the region has become this is no longer the case. Saudi Arabia's capabilities are more conventional and organized for interstate military rivalry and deterrence. Iran's capabilities are of the hybrid warfare variety best suited for intrastate conflict, which as discussed is the primary mode of conflict and competition in the degraded state Middle East system of today. So rather than there being emulation, there is a differentiation of capabilities.⁽¹⁹⁾

Let's break this differentiation of capabilities down a bit further. The capabilities that give Iran advantages in the intrastate, proxy war game in the civil war zones were something we saw much less of among Middle Eastern states during the Cold War. While states may have had hybrid military capabilities, there were fewer opportunities to use them in a strong state-centric system. Today, Iran's unconventional warfare capabilities perfectly match the conditions of the civil wars in the Middle East and the security vacuums created by these conflicts. In other words, Iran's competitive advantage in the current degraded state system gives them options for extending their regional influence unavailable to its rival Saudi Arabia. Iran's low-cost hybrid capabilities draw on alliances,

¹⁸ See Kenneth N. Waltz "Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power" (Chapter 5) In Robert E. Keohane (editor), *Neorealism and its Critics*, (Columbia University Press, New York, NY), 1986, pg. 128 for comments on imitation of capabilities.

¹⁹ See Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, "Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy" in *The Washington Quarterly* vol 40 no 1 (2017), pp, 39-53) for an analysis of Iran's unconventional capabilities.



less with other states as one would see in a classical balance of power system, but more with sub-national militias, such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and other Shi'i paramilitary groups fighting the region's civil wars. The al-Quds force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is the tip of the spear of the Iranian government's unconventional projection of power into the civil war zones of Syria, Iraq and Yemen, a capability unrivaled by Saudi Arabia.⁽²⁰⁾

When there is symmetry of capabilities among adversaries, as was the case during the Cold War, countries could at least roughly estimate their power vis à vis one another. They could compare their conventional forces and then factor in the capability leveraged from their alliances with either the United States or the Soviet Union. This is not to suggest that states during the Cold War didn't miscalculate their capability vis-à-vis other states. In the lead up to the 6-Day War of 1967 between the Arab states, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and Israel, Egypt's President Nasser overestimated Arab power and misguidedly provoked Israel by closing the straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping.⁽²¹⁾ This led to a devastating and embarrassing defeat of the Arab states, and the occupation by Israel of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Sinai. But this miscalculation was mostly corrected for when a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria fought Israel in the 1973 war, which ended largely in a stalemate.

But in a system like the Middle East of today where capabilities are so differentiated, it is very difficult for states like Iran and Saudi Arabia to calibrate their power relative to one another. When competing both in the interstate arena, where Saudi Arabia's superior conventional capabilities give it the advantage, and the intrastate arena, where Iran's hybrid capability yields it competitive superiority, calibrating power is very difficult for both countries. First, threat perceptions are more complex in the two-game system played by the regional powers. Saudi Arabia and Iran both need to assess possible threats directly from one another, as well as indirect threats from each other's involvement in the civil war zones of the Middle East. While Saudi Arabia might worry that Iran has designs on taking over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, it can use conventional military means to deter than kind of adventurism.⁽²²⁾ But it also sees threat from Iran in the civil war zones, where power is projected through murky sub-state alliances, militias and small armed groups, something that makes measuring and deterring power more difficult for the Saudis.

This problem of power estimation is compounded by the fog of the civil wars Iran and Saudi Arabia are competing within. In such ambiguous situations, states have an incentive to overcompensate for the uncertainties by escalating rather than deescalating conflict. When states find it hard to calculate their power relative to their opponent, they will likely operate under the assumption that it is better to be safe than sorry. In other words, they escalate out of fear of defeat. This means there is a tendency for states to eschew calls for de-escalation when they lack the security and confidence in

20 See Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and the United States: Abizaid's Mission Impossible" *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, Working Draft 19 November 2018 and Anthony H. Cordesman "The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, And the Shifting Military Balance", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)* Second Working Draft, 12 December 2018. Also see Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2016) for an analysis of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC).

21 See Guy Laron, *The 6 Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2017) for an excellent accounting of the lead up to and fighting during the six day war of 1967.

22 "Iran threatens to leave 'only Mecca and Medina' untouched if Saudi Arabia does something 'ignorant'", *The Independent*, 8 May 2017.

their own power estimates. This can be seen with Saudi Arabia's escalation of the conflict in Yemen, which has been fueled by uncertainty about the extent of Iran's support for the Houthis, which has led to a shadow-boxing dynamic. In other words, conflicts become greater and escalate when states lack the ability to calibrate power and fail to agree on the regional distribution of power.⁽²³⁾

Bandwagoning vs Clustering

Another property of a balance of power system is that states will cluster together in order to maximize their power against what they collectively perceive to be a regional hegemon. In such a system states will form and strengthen alliances to counteract the efforts of another state that threatens their vital interests. In a strict balance of power system, one might expect Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E) to strengthen their ties with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in a response to what they see as Iran's growing regional influence. But instead Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have sowed dissension within their ranks by censuring and blockading Qatar over what they consider bandwagoning with Iran and its support for non-state actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This has become a self-fulfilling prophecy with Doha responding by moving closer to Saudi rivals Iran and Turkey.⁽²⁴⁾

While balance of power theory struggles with the bandwagoning phenomenon, where states align themselves with, rather than against, the menacing power, it is easier to explain this behavior in the degraded state system the Middle East has become. In this situation, there is little threat of direct military aggression between states like Iran and Saudi Arabia. Rather the threats come indirectly through the civil war zones of the Middle East, meaning they are more diffused, nuanced and murky. They are also more subjective and open to interpretation (or misinterpretation). While Saudi Arabia clearly perceives an acute threat from Iran, because it plays out in the murky intrastate game of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, there is little unanimity about the intensity of the threat. Fellow GCC allies, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, see this less objective threat from Iran very differently and less acutely than Saudi Arabia. This ambiguity about power has created divisions within the GCC and contributed to the rift between Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Bahrain on the one hand, and Qatar on the other. Contrary to balance of power theory, Saudi Arabia has weakened its ranks by censuring Qatar, pushing Doha into bandwagoning behavior, where Qatar moves towards rivals Iran and Turkey.

In other words, clustering makes sense in situations where competition takes place in a more conventional interstate venue, as envisioned by the classical realists, but is more problematic in situations where competition also occurs in a shadowy, intrastate environment where capabilities are harder to calibrate. Common interests that might cause states to cluster in the interstate conflict game don't necessarily hold in the intrastate proxy war game, where sub-state alliances are more common

²³ See Blainey, Geoffrey, *The Causes of War*; (The Free Press, New York, 1973) for a discussion of how agreements on power distribution can be a conflict mitigator and disagreements a *casus belli*.

²⁴ See Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power", *International Security*, Vol 9, No 4, (Spring 1985), pp. 3 - 43 for a discussion of balancing versus bandwagoning behavior among states. Also see Ross Harrison, "Saudi Arabia is Weakening itself and Strengthening Iran", *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2017.



and where control over and trust between allies is likely to be tested. In the interstate conflict arena, the common threat perceived by a group of states from a regional rival is likely to be direct, clear and lead to a closing of ranks. But when these same states are competing in the more ambiguous intrastate environment of the civil war zones of the Middle East, that common threat perception may break down. Also, in this type of civil war venue, fragmentation among local groups on the ground makes holding broader alliances among external actors like Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Qatar more difficult, as trust at the interstate level is eroded by distrust created by murky conditions in the civil war zones.

U.S. Policy doesn't Add Up

It is difficult to discern a coherent pattern of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East during the Trump administration. It seems that rather than following an overarching grand strategy, the administration's policy consists of a series of disconnected decisions. From provocatively moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, to renouncing the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), to the announced peremptory withdrawal of troops from Syria, there seems to be no coherent strategy and no clear sense of how the administration's policy advances U.S. vital interests.

What is clear, however, are the goals the Administration has articulated for the Middle East, and the means by which the administration intends on achieving these objectives. Containing Iran appears to be the primary goal and doubling down on U.S. alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel represent the means for achieving that goal.

Also, what can be discerned from these provocative and controversial moves by the Trump administration is a core belief among policymakers that the Middle East remains a balance of power system that will respond positively to realist-based power moves. The corollary to this belief is that a form of off-shore balancing, where doubling down on support for allies Saudi Arabia and Israel to create a countervailing force against Iran, is the best way to advance U.S. interests.⁽²⁵⁾ And continuing this line of thinking, should this offshore approach not be sufficient for pushing back Iranian interests in the region, U.S. troops in Iraq could also possibly be used to counter Tehran's regional influence.⁽²⁶⁾

But while off-shore balancing is what Trump officials intend to use as a means for countering Iran, based on an analysis of U.S. interests and regional dynamics of the Middle East, this author concludes that for several reasons this is unlikely to work out as intended. First, offshore balancing assumes that there is a hegemonic power having designs on the region. As has been previously discussed, the Middle East is a degraded state system, and while Iran is projecting its influence into the region, it isn't doing this in the hegemonic fashion envisioned by realist-based analysts and practitioners. Rather it is projecting power, not against other states directly, but rather through the most vulnerable areas of the region, which happen to be the civil war zones.

²⁵ Stephen M. Walt, "Has Trump Become a Realist?" *Foreign Policy* April 17, 2018

²⁶ Jack Detsch, "Pentagon Walks back Trump idea of using Iraq base to counter Iran", *al-Monitor*, February 5th, 2019.

Rather than acting as an effect counterforce, U.S. efforts to push back against Iran are likely to compel it to dig in deeper in the civil war zones in order to create a crude type of deterrence against a feared conventional military attack by Israel or the United States. In other words, U.S. pressure against Iran is destined to work like the punctured tire analogy. The more you pressurize a tire with a hole, the more air leaks out of the tire. In this case, the Middle East is the tire with the hole, and Iran's power projection in the civil war zones is the air leaking out of that tire. By pushing Iran into a defensive crouch, the U.S. could destabilize the region, and harm rather than enhance U.S. interests.

Second, offshore balancing by the United States assumes that Iran lacks options of ramping up power through its own alliances in the face of U.S. efforts to marginalize it. Washington's withdrawal from the multilateral JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran, has given Russia, China and Europe the incentive to close ranks with Iran. Given its involvement in Syria alongside Iran, Russia has the capacity and seemingly the will to do this. This could ratchet up, rather than subdue regional conflicts and prolong the destabilizing and tragic effects of civil wars. U.S. global and regional interests will be harmed if the region suffers further instability by pushing Iran into a corner.

While this does suggest that U.S. policymakers desist from treating the region as a realist-based zero-sum game, it doesn't mean the United States should walk away from the strong allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel. But in addition to trying to contain Iran's regional influence through these alliances, it should find ways to engage it. Extreme engagement of Iran won't work, but neither will the extreme containment approach of the Trump administration.

While a diplomatic track is highly unlikely in the wake of the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, constructive engagement with Iran will be necessary to advance U.S. long term interests. In order to turn the Middle East from a degraded state system back into a state-centric region, the civil war zones will need to be quieted and stability restored.⁽²⁷⁾ The United States will eventually need to turn its efforts towards fostering cooperation among the great powers of the region, with an eye towards a security architecture that will transition the region from a zero-sum game to a region where common interests are no longer completely overshadowed by conflicting interests.⁽²⁸⁾

Conclusion

An effective U.S. foreign policy needs to rest on two fundamental pillars. The first is a clear articulation of national security interests. Unlike during the Cold War, the United States has interests, not just with states, but also with the Middle East as a region. With the globalizing effects of the problems of the Middle East, the United States has interests in regional stability. Any policy, whether it be doubling down on an alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia or pushing back against Iran needs to be measured against whether it works for or against that interest. And as has been argued, current U.S. policy deviates from this interest.

27 See Ross Harrison, "The Global and Regional Geopolitics of Civil War in the Middle East", *Middle East Institute Policy Paper 2019-1*, February 2019 for an analysis of how the civil wars affect the prospects for regional stability.

28 See Ross Harrison, chapters 2 and 11 in Ross Harrison and Paul Salem (eds) *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East* (Middle East Institute, Washington, DC) 2017; and Ross Harrison "Regionalism in the Middle East: An Impossible Dream?" in *Orient* 1-2018



The second pillar of any foreign policy is that it needs to be underpinned by an accurate analysis of the Middle East. While the U.S.'s current policy might make sense in a classic balance of power game, there is a different game being played in the current degraded state system in the Middle East today. The United States and its allies are playing mostly an interstate game, while the Iranians are playing an intrastate game in the civil war zones of the region. Not only does this double game mean that the U.S. and Iran are operating in parallel strategic universes, it also means there is a danger that these two games could lethally converge where the United States pushes Iran into a further defensive crouch in Syria. This deepening of Iran's position in Syria (and even Yemen) could then lead to an open military conflict between Iran and Israel, a scenario that conceivably might drag in the United States and even Russia. Acting as if the Middle East is a traditional balance of power, state centric, system could be a self-fulfilling prophesy, where proxy wars fought intrastate in the civil war zones could morph into interstate, conventional conflict between Israel and Iran or even the United States and Iran.

The way out of such a destabilizing conflict vortex is a new policy towards Iran that augments containment with engagement. The goal would be to move Iran into the role of a responsible stakeholder of a more stable regional order. While this is unlikely during the Trump administration, it will be what is needed to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East long term.