

Prepared Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Reed, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. Events are changing rapidly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), challenging the pursuit of U.S. interests and values. Often we are mired in the current crisis of the moment; this hearing offers an opportunity to consider overall U.S. policy objectives in this fluid region, and a strategy to achieve them.

ASSESSING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Any discussion of current and future U.S. Middle East policy must be founded on a realistic assessment of the regional drivers of change. The following four trends have emerged over the past decade and, while not exhaustive, they are directly shaping the context for how the United States pursues its policy objectives in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

First, while it is premature to conclude that the entire nation state system has failed across the region, the weakening of central government authority is observable in the monarchies, former presidential republics, one-party systems, and of course in the many states mired in civil conflict. There is a growing contestation of power in most MENA capitals, with elites and publics challenging the status quo. In some cases, such as in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, we can visually see the state failure in the large swaths of ungoverned territory.

Elsewhere, evidence of state weakening and de-legitimation may have longer term manifestations. In Egypt, for example, despite the strong rule of a new strong man, the largest Arab country faces grave socio-economic problems and a population that will reach 100 million by 2025.¹ Egyptians are facing decreased opportunities for free expression, organization, and representation, portending poorly for future stability. Indeed, the current Egyptian government's approach to its political opposition and to domestic counter-terrorism could generate new types of terrorist threats, thus weakening the state over the medium term.

Second, as both a cause and a result of this state weakening, social mobilization by non-state actors is rising: individuals, citizen groups, tribes, regional blocs, and ethnic and sectarian parties

¹ Magued Osman, "Rapid Population Growth Imperils Egypt," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=484>.

are expressing themselves and their identities in an unprecedented way, demanding rights, cultural protection, economic opportunity, and justice. In some cases, the impact of social media is over-exaggerated, but it is true that the rapid increase in Twitter, Facebook, and other on-line social media use reflects a yearning for expression by many, particularly the approximately 50 percent of MENA citizens who are 25 years old or younger.² In some cases, social and tribal identities are replacing the institutional structures of the state – this is true in parts of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere. In other cases, political parties and factions defined by ethnic and sectarian identities are demanding greater rights and, in some cases, autonomy.

Social mobilization can trigger non-violent protests, as we saw in 2011, but it also has the potential for violence. A third trend is a very real increase in radicalization and terrorism. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a terrifying organization: it holds territory; espouses an ideology that even al-Qaeda finds too violent; and is attracting over 20,000 foreign fighters from across the globe to fight in Syria and Iraq.³ The majority of these foreign fighters are coming from the Arab world.⁴ The appeal of this violent, cult-like ideology, which encourages attacks against minority groups, women, and children and reflects a distorted interpretation of Islam, is alarming. It is important to note that while ISIS poses a direct threat to the United States, and to its regional partners, radicalization and terrorism in MENA is not limited to Sunni jihadists. Indeed, Iranian-funded terrorism endures and also threatens U.S. interests and allies across the region.

Unfortunately, social mobilization and radicalization are part of the same phenomena, caused in part by inadequate governance and institutions, depressed economic opportunity and an absence of appropriate jobs, the fracturing of security infrastructures, and the appeal of radical jihadism as an alternative ideology and identity. These trends were emerging for many years before the Arab Spring; the protest movements of 2011 and the state responses to the revolutions has accelerated these phenomena.

Finally, a fourth trend involves the greater activism with which the region's powers have responded to the combination of state failure, revolution, and radicalism in the post-2011 era. Regional actors have tried to manipulate weak and broken states, materially supporting proxies in civil conflicts and influencing weak governmental actors and parties. Iran has long tried to

² This is a figure cited by the World Economic Forum, in Holly Ellyatt, "Youth Unemployment in Rich Middle East a 'Liability': WEF," *CNBC*, October 15, 2014, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/102088327>.

³ Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, "Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror," Testimony to the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, February 11, 2015, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM00/20150211/102901/HHRG-114-HM00-Wstate-RasmussenN-20150211.pdf>.

⁴ Richard Barrett "Foreign Fighters Fighting in Syria," *The Soufan Group*, June 2, 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

influence the political system in Lebanon, and more recently has expanded its influence into Baghdad and Damascus. The weakening and failure of states across the region offers Tehran greater opportunities to involve itself operationally in local crises, reflected most directly in Iranian military support to the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Other countries are using their economic wealth, and their ideological soft power, to try to influence the outcomes of the region's conflicts. For example, since 2011, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have all tried to support opposition fighters in the Syrian civil conflict. External patronage did not generate coherence, cooperation, and moderation among those fighting the Assad regime and its proxies. In some cases, when regional powers intervene, they are working at cross-purposes, because they often disagree on the role of Islam in political life as well as on how—and whether—to establish inclusive and pluralistic governance systems.

U.S. POLICY IN AN ERA OF REVOLUTION, RADICALIZATION, AND REGIME WEAKENING

In the face of these trends, and the likelihood that the current conditions of ideological and political competition and conflict will endure, U.S. strategy in the region need not be overly broad and all-encompassing. While the United States should not respond to the challenges in the region on a case-by-case approach—mainly because these conflicts are interconnected—it would be overly simplistic to impose a one-size-fits all grand strategy at this moment when the region's states are becoming more dissimilar in terms of trajectories of democratization, violence, terrorism, and economic conditions.

Instead, it makes sense to endorse a series of strategic principles for the United States to articulate publicly and privately. These principles should inform particular U.S. policy approaches to individual countries and conflicts. Although in some cases, the United States may have to deviate from these principles, it is preferable to have a working mission statement for the United States, a cogent explanation of what the United States is seeking and how it will pursue these objectives. The following strategic principles should guide U.S. policy in the near term:

Clearly state U.S. interests and values in the region

U.S. interests are unambiguous and have not changed significantly over time: The United States is protecting the American homeland and its personnel and interests abroad; is countering radicalization, terrorism, and proliferation; and is securing the free flow of natural resources, commerce, and other goods. The United States seeks to protect its allies, including the state of Israel, and to advance a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All of these goals support U.S. interests and enhance regional and international security.

The United States works with the governments and people of the region to address public demands for education, employment, governance, human rights, and just institutions. The U.S.

promotes these ideals because they reflect American values. It has also learned that the pursuit of the above U.S. interests in this region is inextricably tied to—and sometimes depends on—the opportunities afforded to MENA’s citizens.

Appropriately assess U.S influence, leverage, and leadership

For decades, many people and governments in MENA have harbored unrealistic views about the scope of U.S. influence in the region, particularly U.S. policymakers’ ability to shape regional events. These expectations, and the vision of an omnipotent United States masterminding events in the region, are unrealistic. Additionally, they do not reflect the American people’s desire for cooperation and partnership, rather than for control in the MENA region.

It is equally unproductive, however, to underestimate the opportunities for U.S. influence and leverage over events and decision-making in the region. Despite the challenging environment and the rise of new state and non-state actors, the United States can creatively deploy its civilian and military toolkit to increase security, prosperity, and opportunity. U.S. diplomatic persuasion and its role as a leader of international coalitions can prod governments and their people to counter threats and to address basic human security concerns. In some cases, the United States can prod domestic economic and political reforms, particularly when this tough domestic work represents a collaboration between the United States, MENA governments, local civil society, and the MENA citizens who are advocating for change.

Recent events have shown that U.S. influence may be best achieved when the United States mobilizes regional and international coalitions, whether the goal is to fight terrorist groups such as ISIS, to impose multilateral sanctions against Iran, or to cooperate on threats such as cyber and maritime insecurity. In short, the people of the region should not overestimate the determinant nature of U.S. Middle East policy, even as policymakers in Washington should not underestimate U.S. influence in this part of the world.

Finally, real and perceived U.S. presence in the region matters. Without it, regional powers will try to manage and structure the regional order, often working at cross purposes with each other and the United States. Therefore, it is far preferable that the United States leads coalitions, such as the current international coalition against ISIS, to provide order, direction, and a shared strategic vision. Moreover, there is no substitute for the U.S. security guarantor. The people and states of the region will increasingly transact economic and even security business with other great powers, but will continue to look to the United States to provide regional order and leadership.

Align specific policy tools with the U.S. end goal

The United States must seize all diplomatic openings as a first resort, and create diplomatic opportunities where none exist. The United States has unrivaled bilateral diplomatic relations with



many allies and partners in the region, as well as the ability to move other international actors to support regional goals, such as preventing Iranian nuclear proliferation, reaching a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war, or pushing for a final status agreement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The case for diplomacy is clear: in this region, alternatives to diplomacy almost always involve greater bloodshed.

When the United States chooses to intervene militarily, it must use force carefully. U.S. military interventions in the region have been most successful when they have involved local partners, when the use of coercion is carefully targeted to achieve a defined end state, and when the United States makes it clear that it has no intention of deploying ground troops semi-permanently in the region as a “day after” solution. As events in Iraq from 2003-2010 demonstrated, the

indefinite, unending commitment of U.S. combat troops, deployed in the heart of the Arab world, can incite greater anti-American violence and redirect the nature of the fighting so that the United States becomes a party to the conflict.

Finally, the ideal end state for most military interventions in the region involves partner self-sufficiency, measured by the ability and will of local leaders and their security forces to combat mutual threats such as terrorism and proliferation. The training, equipping, and assisting of local partners must be done with an eye for shaping these partners’ entire strategy and doctrine, including the state’s threat perception. While building partnership capacity will necessarily focus on the measurable military capabilities, ensuring that all partner forces act professionally and in a matter consonant with the ultimate goal of inclusive and fair governance are equally important objectives. U.S. security assistance and training programs across the region must be designed in a manner that reflects the particular, local challenges. These include the reasons why local partners may not have the will to fight or why partner security forces may be politicized or otherwise act unprofessionally.

Define partners and partnerships carefully

Partners in the Middle East, whether those currently fighting with us against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, members of the anti-ISIS Coalition, or other long-standing friends and allies share tactical and strategic security goals. Partners identify similar threats. As discussed above, however, building partnership capacity cannot exclusively focus on the technical abilities of regional security forces to fight and use American weapons. U.S. partners must subscribe to the view, born of an abundance of recent evidence, that in this region stability is born of governance that is inclusive, multi-sectarian, and based on compromise and responsible leadership. This is why Iran may share U.S. concerns about ISIS but cannot be an enduring partner in the strategic fight against the group in Iraq and Syria, given its record supporting sectarian political parties that do not espouse pluralistic and inclusive governance.

APPLYING THESE STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES TO TODAY'S CHALLENGES

While these principles above are broad, they can guide U.S. policy responses to today's crises from Libya to Yemen. There are a few immediate implications of the above principles:

First, U.S. efforts since August 2014 to combat ISIS through the efforts of a multilateral Coalition have inserted a degree of management, regional architecture, and order to the post-Arab spring Middle East and North Africa that is generating many positive outcomes. The practical results of U.S. leadership is manifest in the work being conducted by the 60-member Coalition, states working in concert to not only militarily degrade ISIS but also to train moderate Syrian opposition forces and new units of the Iraqi security forces and to counter ISIS' financing, ideology, and recruitment efforts.

Investing U.S. "skin in the game" against ISIS is helping to move regional partners toward unprecedented support countering foreign fighters (i.e. Turkey), countering terrorist financing (i.e. Qatar), and bolstering the Iraqi government diplomatically and through assistance (i.e. Saudi Arabia). This Coalition alone is not a panacea for the problem of ISIS but it represents an effective mechanism that is yielding results on the battlefield and in terms of aligning strategic goals in regional capitals. The Coalition must be nurtured and supported.

Second, the United States must seize diplomatic opportunities, such as the current negotiations between the P5 + 1 and Iran. In almost all cases, the alternatives to diplomacy involve risk, security dilemmas, and greater instability. Opponents of diplomacy have not offered a persuasive near-term plan for preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon without risking potential violence and greater instability for the United States and its regional allies.⁵ Similarly, the pursuit of a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war and the negotiation of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still offer the best pathways for long-term, enduring conflict resolution.

Third, the principles above also point to the right approach to countering Iran's network of shadowy militias, action forces, and terrorist groups that are contributing to destabilization in the region. Iran is not a partner in the work of rebuilding multi-sectarian, inclusive governing institutions. In some cases, coercive measures will be required to counter the Iranian action networks. In other cases in order, to prevent Iranian penetration and influence, other regional actors, with U.S. support will need to play a direct and leading diplomatic and security assistance role. In Yemen, for example, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states led by Saudi Arabia should be in the lead, providing security and countering terrorists who are stoking ethnic and sectarian bloodshed across the country. The United States must publicly and privately support GCC efforts.

⁵ Daryl G. Kimball, Issue Brief, *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 7., Issue 5, March 5, 2015, <http://www.armscontrol.org/Issue-Briefs/2015-03-03/Netanyahu-On-the-Iran-Nuclear-Issue-A-Reality-Check>.

CONCLUSION

In short, MENA states and societies are undergoing a decades-long process of transformation. This process will continue to be violent and non-linear. A U.S. presence and leadership role in the region is critical, to managing and containing crises and preventing regional competition and disorder. In most cases, diplomatic interventions should be a first resort of U.S. policy, but other U.S. tools, when deployed carefully and with clear end goals, can help to achieve key U.S. interests.