



# U.S. Middle East Policy at a Time of Regional Fragmentation and Competition

Lessons for U.S. Policy from the Past Three Years

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# Introduction and summary

The ongoing fragmentation in Iraq and Syria is the latest episode in a series of events that is shaking the foundations of today's Middle East. The region has entered a fluid period of transition involving the growing power of non-state actors, including new Islamist extremist groups, at a time of increased competition for influence among the key countries in the region.

For decades, the United States has grappled with formulating a Middle East strategy that advances both its interests and its values. Under President Barack Obama, the top U.S. priorities in the Middle East have included preventing a terrorist attack on the homeland; stopping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon; ending the Iraq War; maintaining a secure flow of energy from the region; and trying to broker Arab-Israeli peace.

The United States has struggled to define its position since the Arab uprisings in 2011, which sparked a new era of competition among the leading powers in the region. The role and status of Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which rose to power after the uprisings in some Arab countries, have been central in this intraregional struggle. Also, violent Salafi jihadists such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, seek to break down national borders and establish an Islamic state by force. This report, based on field research conducted by the Center for American Progress in multiple countries during the past year,<sup>1</sup> analyzes the current strategic environment and outlines lessons learned that should inform U.S. policy. Those lessons include:

- **The 2011 Arab uprisings sparked a regional competition in a new “Middle East cold war.”** The leading countries of the Middle East and North Africa are engaged in an intense, multipolar, and multidimensional struggle for influence and power. This competition goes beyond Shia-Sunni sectarian divisions and involves traditional tools of power projection—such as military aid and economic assistance—as well as new forms of power projection, including direct

investments in media outlets, non-state actors, and political movements. The region's wealthier, more politically stable states compete with each other by proxy—and in some cases, directly—on the ground in poorer and politically polarized states. This competition has taken on many features of a cold war: different sides engaged in proxy battles across the region using multiple means of influence.

- **The status of Islamist movements is central to this regional competition.** The Muslim Brotherhood's empowerment and subsequent removal from power in Egypt has been a main event and central to this regional struggle. Some states such as Qatar and Turkey back the Muslim Brotherhood, while others such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, or UAE, oppose it. Another new dynamic is the rise of extremist Islamist groups that have challenged the Al Qaeda movement. New political openings, as well as ongoing conflicts such as the civil war in Syria, have enabled a range of political Islamist groups, including the ultraorthodox Salafists, to affect politics in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia and fostered a strand of Islamist extremist groups that has emerged in Syria and Iraq. The regional contest over the status of political Islamists has broad reach; it has contributed to disarray within the Syrian opposition, influenced relations among different Palestinian factions, and affected competition among the various armed groups in Libya.
- **The United States remains the dominant military power in the region but lacks sufficient diplomatic, political, and economic tools to influence regional political trends.** The new and still unfolding regional dynamics limit the effectiveness of a U.S. policy that maintains a heavy reliance on traditional tools of power, such as the military and intelligence. The current U.S. policy approach lacks a nimble and effective ability to engage multiple centers of power in the region politically and economically in strategies that emphasize political pluralism and prosperity. The Obama administration's engagement with political Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood created confusion in the region about U.S. policy priorities and values. The U.S. response to the Arab uprisings and the new Middle East cold war has been uneven and the United States has often appeared as little more than a bystander.

The major changes underway in regional power dynamics point to a need to make U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa more adept at understanding and responding to political currents in a way that reflects both U.S. core security interests and values. Simply focusing on questions of how many troops are stationed in a particular country for what period of time or how much bilateral security assistance the United States gives to a particular country is too narrow and inadequate to deal with the historical changes sweeping the region and upending its political balance.

A wider range of state actors are seeking to advance their interests and values across the region, and the regional landscape now includes a number of non-state actors that have broader reach and impact than they did in previous eras. The United States will not be able to dictate or control events, but many in the region still examine what the United States says and does very closely. Most of its key governments take active steps to shape the trajectory of U.S. policy. The United States should make the most of these diplomatic engagements to craft a wiser engagement policy that seeks to isolate and defeat extremist ideologies in the ongoing battle of ideas.

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