



Can the US Engage Effectively in Today's Middle East?

by *Marcelle M. Wahba*

Moving beyond military-to-military driven relationships is long overdue

The Middle East is undergoing a period of profound transition. There are failed or failing states in Libya and Yemen, a raging civil war in Syria and ongoing instability in Iraq. Egypt has returned to a familiar style of uneasy stability under a new authoritarian regime. The role of political Islam continues to be fiercely contested in the aftermath of the 2010-11 uprisings, and this issue remains at the heart of the ongoing crisis that pits Saudi Arabia and the UAE against neighboring Qatar.

Even the more stable countries in the region are undergoing a period of rapid social and economic transformation. A larger, wealthier and more educated middle class has emerged; there has

been a concurrent revolution in the media and information landscapes. The ambitions of a more connected youth generation presage fundamental changes in how these states, societies and citizens relate to each other, conduct business and engage with the rest of the world.

Diminishing US influence

The US's ability to influence events in the region has declined in recent years. The failure and catastrophic consequences of the invasion of Iraq, the subsequent rise of the Islamic State and the ongoing 16-year war in Afghanistan demonstrate the US's inability to impose stability in the region on its terms. The US is now viewed by many in the region as a primary instigator of turbulence rather than the primary guarantor of stability.

With the traditional Arab power centers of Egypt, Iraq and Syria profoundly weakened, the Gulf states have stepped in to fill the leadership void. There is a rising assertiveness by Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to defend their national interests and expand their influence in the region while at the same time checking Iranian power. To be sure, many of the region's conflicts today do not lend themselves to solutions crafted or imposed by external powers. For example, the Syrian civil war and the debate over the future role of political Islam will require complex and evolving local or regional solutions. The emerging political and strategic landscape in the Middle East will therefore have to be largely defined by regional players in a complex dance of competition and cooperation.

There is evidence of this trend in the decision of the recently-formed "quartet" of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain to sever ties with Qatar in June to force a change in Doha's foreign policy. Crucially, this diplomatic break was not coordinated with Washington, and some parts of the US government were taken by surprise when it was announced—events could not have unfolded in such a manner ten years ago.

Rethinking US engagement

To regain its standing and credibility, the US needs to recognize regional realities in all their

complexity as they are today and not as they were years ago. For too long, the US has focused almost exclusively on the military-to-military relationships that now define most of its bilateral relationships. Therefore, when the military presence is reduced (as what happened when the Obama administration began withdrawing from Iraq), allies interpret that to mean the US is disengaging from the region. When the military relationship is the primary means of engagement, it naturally becomes the defining factor shaping US interests in the region, or at least local perceptions of them.

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For this reason, US military leaders have been publicly calling for increased financial and human resources for the State Department. US involvement in the complex conflicts in the region since 9/11 have highlighted the need for a broader diplomatic presence that encompasses cultural and language expertise at the country-specific level. The military cannot and should not take the lead in developing the civil society, academic and political leadership linkages needed to develop the in-depth understanding of countries crucial to US national interests. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has said it would make sharp budget cuts to the State Department that, if enacted, would cripple US diplomacy for the next decade.

The new US administration should instead focus on strengthening and broadening bilateral relations, particularly on the diplomatic front. One size never fits all in the Middle East, and now more so than ever. Regional allies will more readily engage and partner with the United States when relationships are based on an in-depth understanding of their interests, and a strong sense of mutual trust and respect are established. More than ever, this is essential for effective US involvement in today's Middle East.

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