



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

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

By Brian Katulis and Peter Juul June 2014

Center for American Progress



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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 and fast-moving 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,¹ 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 the new 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 the region 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 particular country is too narrow and inadequate to deal with the historical changes sweeping the region and upending the regional 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 the key governments in the region 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.

Regional fragmentation and the new Middle East cold war

The Arab uprisings that began in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa continue to have widespread implications throughout the region. The struggle for political legitimacy that these popular protests set off continues; it also sparked an intense regional competition for influence across the region that challenges the sectarian Sunni and Shia labels. This competition is intense, multipolar, and multidimensional, and the complexity of these cross-regional dynamics makes it difficult for the United States or any other outside actor to advance a coherent, strategic policy approach to the region.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, some scholars characterized intrastate competition in the Middle East as an “Arab Cold War” that pitted more-conservative monarchies against revolutionary, nationalist republics.² Today, the key countries in the Middle East are locked in a new cold war that is likely to continue for years to come. The ongoing struggle over the status and role of political Islamists in the Arab republics is one of the central fronts in this regional competition. Today’s cold war in the Middle East differs from the previous Arab Cold War in several ways. First, there are more actors, both state and non-state, engaged in this struggle. Non-Arab states such as Turkey and Iran are more central today, and non-state actors such as Islamist groups and nongovernmental organizations have a greater ability to influence the region’s overall political trajectory than before. Furthermore, the greater diversity in the region’s media debates and the fragmentation of political power have introduced new complexities in today’s regional competition for power.

The incomplete 2011 Arab uprisings

The series of events that has unfolded since 2011 is difficult to place under one single heading. The “Arab Spring” and “Arab Awakening” labels are incomplete and do not sufficiently describe the phenomenon currently underway in several key countries: a battle for political legitimacy that is fragmenting and fracturing old centers of power and straining institutions.

But the overall effect across the region has been limited in many ways. Of the 19 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, four—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—have seen their leaders change; one—Syria—has slipped into a vicious civil war that has spilled over into its neighbor, Iraq; and a number of other countries—including Bahrain—have seen deadly instability. Yet, the majority of countries in the region have not seen substantial changes in their internal power structures or political leadership, at least for now.

In the four countries that experienced shifts in leadership, the changes remain quite limited when it comes to who controls the levers of power, including the security services and the political economy. Egypt, the region's most populous country, has experienced multiple political upheavals since 2011, yet the security institutions have remained dominant actors. The election of a new Egyptian president this year offers a chance for the country to establish a steadier political transition than it has seen since 2011. Tunisia and Yemen have had the steadiest progress toward political reform, but these processes remain incomplete. Given the demographic, economic, social, and political pressures nearly all countries in the region are facing, it appears that the Middle East and North Africa have entered a prolonged and uncertain period of transition. More than three years into these changes, it remains unclear whether this period will lead to progressive change with greater stability, prosperity, and respect for basic human rights and freedoms.

Regional competition for influence and power that goes beyond the Sunni-Shia divide

The regional competition is multipolar—it does not fit into categories that are often used as a framework for analysis. The competition is frequently conceptualized as a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shia Muslim blocs, led respectively by the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran.³ It is true that sectarianism came to play a major role in regional politics after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq by U.S.-led forces in 2003. The leaders of the Gulf monarchies—particularly those with significant domestic populations of Shia heritage, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—view events in the region at least partially through a sectarian lens.⁴ This lens leads these states to see Shia populations across the region as potential or actual pawns of Iran. As a result, Iran's neighbors in the Gulf see the country as a direct threat, adding to worries about its nuclear program and support for terrorist groups throughout the region.

Furthermore, these sectarian perceptions have been fueled by the civil wars in Iraq and Syria since 2003. In Iraq, the removal of Saddam and post-invasion American policy combined to empower Shia Islamist parties with close relations with Iran. Tehran itself directly supported armed groups, as well as political parties, in a successful effort to maximize its influence in Baghdad. Similarly, the civil war in Syria has hardened regional sectarian perceptions. Iran and Hezbollah have backed the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against rebels that include—among others—Sunni jihadi groups backed by some elements in the Gulf, such as the ISIS, al-Nusra Front, and Ahrar al-Sham. For its part, Hezbollah has justified its intervention in Syria’s civil war in part on sectarian grounds, claiming to protect Shia holy sites.⁵

Although the Shia-Sunni divide remains important, it is incomplete and obscures other equally important aspects of the post-2011 competition for power and influence among Sunni-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and the civil war in Syria have created new arenas for both emerging and established regional powers to vie for influence. Better understanding this competition is essential to crafting effective U.S. policy in the future.

Emerging regional powers have new impact

Before 2011, states such as Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE had already begun attempting to translate their growing economic power into political influence throughout the region—a process that has only intensified since then. Turkey leveraged its economic growth—the country’s real gross domestic product, or GDP, increased 64 percent from 2002 to 2012⁶—to pursue an aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. Qatar also saw its influence in the region grow in the first decade of the 21st century, primarily through its satellite television channel, Al Jazeera, and through direct financial and other support to many Islamist groups throughout the region. Similarly, the UAE has channeled its increased economic and military clout into geopolitics.

Established regional powers struggle

Established regional powers have fared less well in the first 15 years of the 21st century. For all its energy wealth and political influence, Saudi Arabia has had major difficulties achieving results throughout the region. It has waged largely

ineffectual struggles against Iran in Lebanon, Iraq, and now Syria, while failing to advance the Arab Peace Initiative with Israel since it was first proposed in 2002. On its immediate periphery, however, the Saudi government in Riyadh has had some foreign policy successes—for example, suppressing the uprising in Bahrain and helping arrange a political transition in Yemen. Another established power, Egypt, has seen its regional standing decline. The political turmoil that followed former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow has made the country an arena for regional competition rather than a participant.

The new regional blocs

As these new power centers have emerged, the region has lined up into three major blocs:

1. An Iranian-led coalition that includes President Assad’s regime in Syria, the Shia Islamist terror group Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government in Iraq
2. A bloc sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, consisting of Qatar and Turkey, which see the Muslim Brotherhood as a key vector to project influence
3. A bloc that includes Saudi Arabia, smaller Gulf states such as the UAE, and the post-coup government in Egypt

These blocs compete against one another for power and influence both across the region and within polarized countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The fluid competition suggests that no single power or force will dominate in the overall strategic landscape of the Middle East and North Africa. In this new period, the rise of non-state actors such as the ISIS will continue to strain an already creaking regional order.

Multidimensional regional competition for power

In this new Middle East cold war, the struggle for influence in the region takes place in multiple arenas: politics, the media, the economy, and among think tanks. The battle is not simply about security as it is traditionally defined—although this is a key component, particularly in Syria’s civil war, the recent blitzkrieg by ISIS in

Iraq, and the continued turmoil and threats posed by terrorist groups in Yemen, Egypt, and Libya. Even though cross-border conflicts between states have become more rare in recent decades, countries are trying to shape and alter the internal security dynamics of other countries through direct military aid and support for non-state terrorist networks.

But the new feature of the battle, which has unfolded in the past decade, is the expansion of the competition between states in the new arenas of politics, media, and the economy. In general, the wealthier, more politically stable states have advanced their national interests by offering financial support to governments and political actors in countries that are less wealthy and gripped by deep political polarization. Media outlets and support for media campaigns are important force multipliers in this ongoing struggle. Diplomatic appeals and outreach to the United States and Europe are also a component. Competitive elections in some countries allowed Islamist political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood to become more visible and present, and Islamists have moved to the center stage in this regional competition for influence and power.

Islamists at the center of the regional struggle for influence

Islamism—broadly defined as the promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character⁷—has a deep history that dates back decades and has evolved into many different strands around the world. The Islamists that have risen to prominence in the past three years in the Middle East have included Muslim Brotherhood organizations and their political affiliates. In addition, a number of countries in the region have witnessed the increased political participation of Salafists, who adhere to a strict and conservative interpretation of Islam and are distinct from the Muslim Brotherhood. New strands of Islamist extremism in Syria and Iraq have surfaced to compete with the range of Islamist groups that previously existed.

These Islamist forces are generally extremely conservative in their worldview. They have been present in the Middle East and North Africa for decades, but the regional uprisings in 2011 created openings for them to take on political roles in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular has relied on state support and coordination with countries such as Qatar and Turkey to survive and thrive.

Islamist groups' rise to power prompted a popular opposition internally, as well as externally. The external support that Muslim Brotherhood organizations received motivated a number of regional countermoves by countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, including supporting the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt and backing the new government there. Further complicating these dynamics, there has been a recent surge in Salafism in many countries, a separate and distinct phenomenon from the Muslim Brotherhood. This convoluted landscape has paralyzed U.S. policymakers in many ways as they struggle to adapt to the region's ever-shifting security, political, and ideological trends.

Roots of the Muslim Brotherhood's worldview

The Society of Muslim Brothers, more commonly known as the Muslim Brotherhood, is a Sunni Muslim socio-political organization and transnational ideological movement that was founded by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928.⁸ Inspired by al-Banna's Egyptian group, Brotherhood organizations were subsequently established in Syria, Sudan, Jordan, Libya, and across the region in the years following World War II.⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood movement shares an overarching ideological framework that aims to restore conservative Islam to the center of political and social life in Muslim-majority societies as a means of collective regeneration. It has much in common with other forms of right-wing authoritarian populism that emerged as a political force around the world in the early 20th century. Today's leading Islamist political forces are rooted in opposition to social, political, and economic developments that they see as disrupting traditional social authority, as well as secularization—defined as the separation of religion from social, political, and cultural life.¹⁰ The movement opposes liberal democracy that is unrestricted by Islamic law and its conservative worldview.

Islamists today thrive on an international network established in the 1960s by the Saudis and Muslim Brotherhood members in exile from their home countries in Saudi Arabia in order to promote conservative Islam as an ideological counterweight to Arab nationalism. Among Muslim Brotherhood organizations and affiliates in other countries, there is a general recognition of the seniority of the Egyptian Brotherhood. However, a shared ideological framework and common networks have not translated into a functioning hierarchical international organization. The Brotherhood's attempts to forge such an organization have faltered around differing priorities and domestic political situations. Yet the national groups remain linked by ideological and peer-to-peer ties between Muslim Brotherhood organizations and other Islamists.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a tightly knit organization that has largely survived due to a closed, rigid vertical hierarchy that appears to be a secret society to outsider observers. The Muslim Brotherhood has largely operated clandestinely to evade governments that wish to infiltrate and disrupt the group. Joining the group is a highly regulated vetting process, and failing the standards as a member immediately triggers demotion or expulsion. All the while, the group's internal operation is secretive.

While the Muslim Brotherhood has been pragmatic in its tactics, its central objective of collective regeneration through the imposition of religious law and norms remains the consistent ideological thread running throughout its history.¹¹ This ideological foundation provides the basis for the Brotherhood's reactionary positions on issues such as women's rights, anti-Semitism, sectarianism, democracy, violence, and secularism.

In the broader regional political dynamic, the Muslim Brotherhood has played an important role in the strategies of the leading states. The relationship is symbiotic, with the Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations accruing benefits from an environment that is dominated by state interests.¹²

The Muslim Brotherhood's regional role before 2011

State sponsorship of Islamism and Islamist groups and individuals is a long-standing strategy for influence in the Middle East. It is an approach that has its origins in the 1950s, when Saudi Arabia and some of its fellow Gulf monarchies sought to counter the ideological influence of Arab nationalism as represented by then-Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Riyadh blasted Nasser's ideology as "fake nationalism based on atheistic doctrine."¹³ To meet this challenge and project its own influence, Saudi Arabia founded a series of Islamism-promoting institutions, starting with the Muslim World League in 1962.¹⁴

The exile of Muslim Brotherhood members from Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in the 1950s and 1960s is perhaps the most important development in the Brotherhood's international history. Exile not only enabled the Egyptian Brotherhood to survive a period of repression that nearly broke the organization in Egypt itself, but also allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to spread its ideas and methods on a much wider scale by joining forces with the Saudi monarchy to provide a conservative religious counterbalance to the then-surging tide of Arab nationalism. Together, exiled Brotherhood members and the Saudi monarchy mounted a successful effort to establish an international network to spread Islamist ideas, norms, and practices. The role of the Muslim Brotherhood in mobilizing jihadi fighters against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan illustrates its important place in the transnational Islamist ideological network.

The Muslim Brotherhood and some of its Gulf sponsors would split over the reactions of Brotherhood organizations and their leaders to Saddam Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and 1991. The Saudi government's quick decision to invite American and other foreign troops to defend the kingdom brought quick condemnation from Brotherhood organizations in Sudan, Tunisia, and Jordan, while the Egyptian Brotherhood came out in opposition later.¹⁵ Hamas—the Palestinian Brotherhood branch—backed Riyadh, while Kuwait's Brotherhood affiliate left the Muslim Brotherhood's international organization in protest of its support for Saddam's seizure of their country.¹⁶

Ultimately, the first Gulf War proved to Riyadh that for all the backing it had given to Muslim Brotherhood organizations and their members, it could not count on them to support Saudi foreign policy when the monarchy required it. Riyadh would be further alienated from the Brotherhood over the subsequent domestic challenge it faced from Brotherhood-influenced groups known as the Sahwa, or "Awakening," starting in the early 1990s.¹⁷ By 2002, then-Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud would declare the Muslim Brotherhood the "source of all evils in the Kingdom."¹⁸

Following the schism with Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood relied on Europe as a haven and target for political expansion among the continent's Muslims. It established groups and institutions that played host to exiled Brotherhood members. For instance, Mahdi Akef, the Egyptian Brotherhood's supreme guide from 2004 to 2010, spent three years in the mid-1980s as head imam of the Islamic Center of Munich.¹⁹ The Brotherhood's European affiliates operate under the ostensible umbrella of the U.K.-based Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe. This organization also incorporates the European Council for Fatwa and Research, headed by the Qatar-based, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated television cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi.²⁰

In short, due to its ideological competition with Arab nationalist regimes, Saudi Arabia and other conservative regional governments provided safe haven, employment, and funding to Muslim Brotherhood members fleeing crackdowns in their home countries during the 1950s and 1960s. These governments did so as a central component of state strategy in order to combat the influence of their rivals and bolster their own by sponsoring an ultraconservative ideology that was congenial to domestic self-preservation.

The Muslim Brotherhood's increased political role in the Middle East and North Africa: 2011 to 2013

Following Egyptian President Mubarak's overthrow in February 2011, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood began an ascent to power that culminated in the election of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as president in June 2012.²¹ The Muslim Brotherhood had a limited role in the initial protests that motivated Egypt's security establishment to pressure President Mubarak to resign, but the group took advantage of political dynamics and Egypt's haphazard political transition to assume a leading role in parliament and win the presidency in the country's first-ever open and sharply contested presidential elections.

The Egyptian Brotherhood's post-Mubarak rise had substantial influence on its sibling organizations across the region and regional politics as a whole. As the progenitor of Brotherhood organizations across the region and regional Islamism more generally, the national level success or failure of the Egyptian Brotherhood has historically set the zeitgeist for regional Islamism.

Muslim Brotherhood organizations saw themselves and were seen as the rising political force in mid-2012—a force that the Turkish and Qatari governments, already ideologically sympathetic to the Brotherhood, tried to harness and other governments, such as those in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, sought to counter. Turkish and Qatari ideological sympathy for the Brotherhood translated into the presumption that Brotherhood organizations would serve as a vector for their own geopolitical influence.²² Control of al-Azhar University in Cairo—the most prominent Sunni Islamic theological institution in the world, which graduates many of the region's leading Sunni clerics—was a contested symbolic prize in this struggle.

The 2011 and 2012 electoral victories of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda—its equivalent in Tunisia—provoked grandiose statements about the historic nature of their successes. Hamadi Jebali, then a senior member of Ennahda and subsequently Tunisia's prime minister, claimed his movement's election victory represented “a new cycle of civilization” and the beginning of “the sixth caliphate, God willing.”²³ Similarly, Egyptian Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie stated that the Brotherhood's showing in the first rounds of Egypt's parliamentary elections in December 2011 represented the first step in “achieving [the Brotherhood's] greatest goal as envisioned by its founder, Imam Hasan al-Banna ... a rightly guided caliphate and mastership of the world.”²⁴

While these statements can be dismissed as impossible aspirations made in the intoxicating wake of electoral success, they nonetheless represent a widespread internal view of Muslim Brotherhood organizations as part of a transnational movement with transnational goals. This view was reflected in interviews that CAP conducted with both Brotherhood members and non-Islamists in the region. As the president of the Shura Council of the Islamic Action Front—the Jordanian Brotherhood’s political arm—put it, “The Muslim Brotherhood is a spirit present in the umma. ... The seed of the Muslim Brotherhood is not just present in certain individuals. It is present in the street. This group extends from the Far East to the Far West. It is present with different names.”²⁵

Beyond this reinvigorated sense of Brotherhood internationalism, more concrete steps were taken to coordinate between national level organizations. President Morsi and Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal both participated in the Justice and Development Party’s, or AKP’s—Turkey’s Islamist ruling political party—congress in Ankara in September 2012, where Morsi expressed his “admiration” for the AKP’s achievements. Meshaal lauded Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not only as a leader of Turkey, but also as “a leader in the Muslim world.”²⁶

More prosaically, the Jordanian Brotherhood sought the advice of the Egyptian Brotherhood and its supreme guide as to whether they should participate in King Abdullah II’s national dialogue committee. King Abdullah claims that having seen events in Egypt, the Jordanian Brotherhood prematurely “decided they had won” and refused to participate.²⁷ This sense of the Muslim Brotherhood as the wave of the regional future was echoed by the Syrian Brotherhood, which viewed its political success in a post-Assad Syria as inevitable “based on what happened in Morocco, Libya, Egypt, and Turkey” as of January 2013.²⁸

Turkey and Qatar made attempts to ride what they saw as a pro-Brotherhood regional wave from 2011 to 2013. Turkey’s ruling AKP, as well as Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, views foreign relations through an Islamist lens.²⁹ Prime Minister Erdoğan and his government repeatedly expressed sympathy for Islamist groups and leaders prior to 2011—for instance, cultivating a relationship with the Palestinian organization Hamas starting in 2006.³⁰

Turkey also serves as the hub and safe haven for the Syrian Brotherhood as it maneuvers for hegemony within opposition political organizations.³¹ As scholars Yezid Sayigh and Raphaël Lefèvre put it, “Turkey is the Brotherhood’s only secure base in the countries neighboring Syria, offering a safe meeting place for the movement’s leaders and hosting its offices.”³² Moreover, Ankara has been viewed as favoring the Syrian Brotherhood over other members of the Syrian opposition due to ideological sympathies.³³

While most Gulf monarchies became alienated from the Muslim Brotherhood after the first Gulf War in 1991, Qatar continued to see the Brotherhood movement as providing a path for its own regional influence and maintains a mutually beneficial relationship. Since the early 1960s, the Qatar government in Doha has been home to prominent Brotherhood-affiliated television cleric al-Qaradawi, who has a program on Al Jazeera that has been on the air since the satellite network’s inception in the mid-1990s.³⁴ Al Jazeera Arabic served as a veritable booster of the Brotherhood in Egypt, and it provided favorable coverage of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas compared to their rivals.

Doha’s promotion of the Brotherhood did not end at Egypt’s borders. It has supported the Syrian Brotherhood’s efforts to control internationally recognized opposition political bodies, including pushing a divisive Muslim Brotherhood candidate for interim prime minister in March 2013.³⁵ Moreover, Qatar has provided support to Hamas. Then-Emir Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani visited Hamas-ruled Gaza in 2012, pledging \$400 million in aid and providing the terrorist organization a political boost against its Palestinian political rivals.³⁶ Qatar has also been accused of funding the Libyan Brotherhood’s Justice and Construction Party, although the party denies that it receives any such support.³⁷

Both Qatar and Turkey offered post-Mubarak Egypt billions of dollars in loans: Doha reportedly provided \$8 billion in assistance in the first two years following Mubarak’s fall, while Turkey agreed to provide Egypt with \$2 billion in loans in September 2012.³⁸ Qatar announced another \$18 billion in investments in Egypt’s tourism and energy sectors in 2012 alone.³⁹

For their part, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners remained cool toward the Egyptian Brotherhood and at odds with Qatar and Turkey over policy in Syria. In Syria, Qatar has served as a financial backer for some of the more extremist opposition groups, including those with ties to Al Qaeda. Turkey’s efforts to prevent the rise of extremists in Syria during the period from 2011 to 2013 were insuf-

ficient as well, enabling these groups to continue influencing the conflict. Private support from the Gulf was also a factor, as evidenced by private Gulf support for extremist groups such as al-Nusra Front in Syria.⁴⁰

Beyond official aid, Saudi Arabia has been accused of providing financial backing to Salafi parties in Egypt—particularly after the unexpectedly strong performance of these parties in the 2011 parliamentary elections.⁴¹ Though it is clear that Salafi groups receive vast funding from the Gulf,⁴² it remains uncertain whether Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states financially support Salafi parties in Egypt as a matter of state strategy.

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt and Tunisia faced popular opposition inside both countries by mid-2013. In Egypt, the Morsi government's lack of inclusion and pluralism in the political transition process, its poor management of the country's economic problems, and its handling of certain foreign policy issues prompted a massive wave of protests that eventually led to the military's ouster of President Morsi and his government.⁴³ In Tunisia, political polarization and opposition to its leadership from leftist and secular political forces prompted the Muslim Brotherhood's Ennahda party to hand over power to a caretaker government, which took control in January.⁴⁴

In Syria, the civil war continued to rage and the Assad regime, with support from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, regained its momentum by the end of 2013. Syria's opposition forces grew more divided, with the more extremist Islamists in the Syrian opposition growing stronger as the influence of Muslim Brotherhood members waned.

During this period from 2011 to 2013, the United States remained largely on the sidelines of these major trends sweeping the region. The Obama administration made public statements about the transition in Egypt that aimed to balance U.S. security interests with support for democracy and human rights, but it ended up confusing nearly all audiences. To many, it appeared that U.S. diplomatic engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its muted criticisms of the Morsi government's lack of political inclusion, was a sign that the United States acceded to the Brotherhood's rise to power.

Meanwhile, the United States made offers of new economic and political transition assistance to a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but most of these offers remained unfulfilled.⁴⁵ Moreover, the United States stayed

away from becoming deeply involved in Syria's civil war, offering humanitarian assistance to the growing numbers of refugees, providing limited support to Syria's opposition forces, and trying unsuccessfully to advance a diplomatic solution. Overall, U.S. strategy in the Middle East and North Africa relied heavily on the traditional tools of engagement in the forms of military cooperation and assistance, intelligence cooperation, and some economic support. These tools were important in helping to provide an overarching security umbrella for the region, particularly the Gulf, but they have been of limited use in this new political competition sparked by the Arab uprisings.

The Muslim Brotherhood on its heels: 2013 to present

The July 2013 removal of Egyptian President Morsi was a reaction first and foremost to the massive protests from Egyptians, who took to the street in numbers larger than those of the initial wave of protests that led to Mubarak's ouster. More than 20 million Egyptians had signed a petition asking for early elections—a demand that Morsi rejected, leading to his ouster by Egypt's security forces with fairly strong public support. The Muslim Brotherhood's removal from power and the subsequent crackdown against it brought both the Brotherhood's dependence on state sponsors and the regional divide between pro- and anti-Brotherhood blocs into sharp relief.

Led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, the anti-Brotherhood bloc gave large sums to support the new Egyptian government that dwarfed U.S. assistance to Egypt. Those Brotherhood members not arrested by the Egyptian security services scattered to exile in friendly states such as Turkey and Qatar, as well as neutral locales such as London. Moreover, the Brotherhood's fall in Egypt demoralized other Brotherhood organizations.

Paradoxically, the Brotherhood's transnationalism has been both weakened and strengthened by its overthrow in Egypt. When it was in power in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood served both as a model and source of inspiration for its sibling organizations. It accrued the intangible prestige that comes with holding power and allowed other Brotherhood organizations to claim their movements were the wave of the future.

While the Brotherhood's fall from power in Egypt weakened this form of transnationalism, it forced the organization to rely on and strengthen its transnational ties more than at any point since the Nasser era. Once again, state sponsors are keeping the Muslim Brotherhood alive.

The pro-Muslim Brotherhood bloc

Indeed, Turkey emerged as the Muslim Brotherhood's most vocal state sponsor in the wake of the July 2013 coup. In its own way, Ankara contributed to the outcome by advising President Morsi to hold firm amid widespread protests against his rule.⁴⁶ Prime Minister Erdoğan refused to recognize Morsi's removal and accused Israel of orchestrating it. Moreover, Erdoğan proved an early adopter of a hand gesture—itsself apparently of Turkish origin—indicating solidarity with the Brotherhood after the bloody mid-August dispersal of the group's Cairo sit-in demonstrations by Egyptian security forces.⁴⁷ By November 2013, the Turkish prime minister's rhetoric became inflammatory enough for the Egyptian government to expel Turkey's ambassador to Cairo, saying that Ankara was “interfering in Egypt's internal affairs” by “attempting to influence public opinion against Egyptian interests” and supporting “meetings of organizations that seek to create instability in the country.”⁴⁸

The following month, the Muslim Brotherhood began broadcasting its Rabaa satellite television network from Istanbul,⁴⁹ and many more broadcast outlets have launched since then. The Rabaa network's opening guest was the Qatar-based, Brotherhood-affiliated cleric al-Qaradawi.⁵⁰ The Rabaa channel and similar Turkey- and Qatar-based media platforms advocate violence against the Egyptian government. A prominent Muslim Brotherhood supporter, Egyptian cleric Wagdy Ghoneim, declared Egypt's President-elect Abdel Fattah al-Sisi an apostate.⁵¹ On a segment aired on the Rabaa channel, Sheikh Mohamed Abdel-Maqsoud said, “We try to terrorize them [security services]. Either by burning their cars, or threatening them, or burning their homes.”⁵²

On a strategic level, the Muslim Brotherhood's removal from power in Egypt aborted Turkey's grandiose ambitions to assume the leadership of a regional bloc of Islamist-governed states.⁵³ In other words, Ankara bet heavily on Morsi and the Brotherhood and lost. Still, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan sees domestic

political benefit in his continued support for the Brotherhood. In his April local election campaign, for instance, Erdoğan urged the AKP's supporters to deliver an "Ottoman slap" to his political opponents⁵⁴ and invoked the Brotherhood's fate to mobilize his own party's religiously conservative base.⁵⁵

Qatar also continues to provide support to the Muslim Brotherhood. Similar to Turkey, it has served as a physical safe haven for Brotherhood members in exile. Egyptian Brotherhood Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein, for instance, resides in Doha,⁵⁶ which serves as a transnational hub for the Egyptian Brotherhood and its sibling organizations. Several Brotherhood leaders have had their hotel accommodations paid for by Al Jazeera, the state-backed satellite broadcast network.⁵⁷

Al Jazeera in particular has come to be seen as a pro-Brotherhood partisan mouthpiece in the region.⁵⁸ Since the ouster of Morsi, Al Jazeera has become the only high-profile outlet to give the Brotherhood a largely unchallenged platform.⁵⁹

The status of al-Qaradawi has become a particularly high-profile issue for Doha. Following the overthrow of Morsi, al-Qaradawi issued a fatwa calling the coup "haram [religiously impermissible]" and claiming, "Nothing can come after this except divine wrath and punishment."⁶⁰ Al-Qaradawi, who had previously issued a religious ruling calling on people to vote in the 2012 presidential elections, did the exact opposite in the 2014 elections.⁶¹ Al-Qaradawi's ongoing inflammatory remarks against the post-coup government in Cairo led the Egyptian government to demand his extradition from Qatar.⁶²

Beyond its regional sponsors in Ankara and Doha, the Muslim Brotherhood has found safe haven in Europe, predominantly London. The British capital has been a public relations and media center for the Brotherhood since the 1990s, with the offices of the Brotherhood's English-language website, Ikhwan Web, headquartered there since 2005.⁶³ Brotherhood members in the United Kingdom have hired a team of British lawyers to orchestrate legal challenges to the post-coup Egyptian government, including a recent failed attempt to open an International Criminal Court investigation.⁶⁴ However, the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to operate freely in London may soon be curtailed: British Prime Minister David Cameron has ordered an inquiry into the organization's activities in the United Kingdom.⁶⁵

The anti-Muslim Brotherhood bloc and the contest for influence

The disposition of the Muslim Brotherhood in the wake of the coup and crackdown in Egypt illustrates its dependence on state support for survival. Equally important, it also shows how the Brotherhood and its transnational activities are shaped by regional competitions for and configurations of power. The coup in Egypt marked a new phase in the contest for influence between the pro-Brotherhood Turkey-Qatar axis and the Saudi-led anti-Brotherhood coalition. Egypt has become a zero-sum game for these two blocs: the Brotherhood's fall was Ankara's and Doha's loss and Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's gain in their contest for regional influence.

Following President Morsi's overthrow, Saudi Arabia and its partners showered the new Egyptian government with billions of dollars of assistance. Within a week of the coup, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait pledged a combined \$12 billion in aid to Cairo.⁶⁶ This initial sum has since been supplemented by an additional \$1.9 billion from the UAE.⁶⁷ The aid amounts are expected to exponentially increase now that the Gulf's preferred candidate, al-Sisi, is Egypt's president. What's more, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal vowed that Riyadh would fill any voids created by cuts in American aid to Egypt.⁶⁸

For its part, Egypt's new government has made no secret of its alignment with the anti-Brotherhood bloc and its discontent with Turkey and Qatar. President al-Sisi, when he was still Egypt's defense minister, made a high-profile visit to the UAE in the weeks leading up to the announcement of his candidacy.⁶⁹ More recently, he pledged that his first foreign visit as president would be to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁰ Cairo's distaste for Qatar is equally clear. In addition to its diplomatic clash over al-Qaradawi's status, Egypt has already returned \$3 billion in Qatari funds and plans to return another \$3 billion more in loans from Doha later this year.⁷¹

Beyond Egypt, the post-2013 environment has seen several countermoves by the anti-Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the region, with support going to elements of the Syrian opposition that are not aligned with the Brotherhood and efforts to back forces in Libya that are not supportive of Islamists. Egypt's post-coup government designated the Egyptian Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in December 2013,⁷² with Saudi Arabia following suit in March as part of a wide-ranging crackdown on virtually all forms of political expression.⁷³ Shortly after announcing Riyadh's own ban on the Brotherhood, Saudi Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef unsuccessfully attempted to convince fellow Arab security chiefs to follow the Saudi government's path at a private summit in Morocco.⁷⁴

The post-coup environment has also produced increasingly direct clashes between Qatar and the anti-Brotherhood states of the Gulf. Brotherhood-affiliated television cleric al-Qaradawi provided the initial spark when he criticized the Emirati government as having “always been opposed to Islamic rule.”⁷⁵ The UAE then summoned Qatar’s ambassador to protest al-Qaradawi’s “insolent remarks.”⁷⁶ This incident served as mere prelude for the joint withdrawal of the Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini ambassadors from Qatar in March.⁷⁷ Egypt joined Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Manama by withdrawing its own ambassador from Qatar the next day.⁷⁸ The threat of potential sanctions and border closings against Qatar still lingers.⁷⁹

These moves appear to have had at least some of the desired effect: The six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar—agreed in mid-April to establish mechanisms “to ensure that policies of any GCC countries do not affect the interests, security, and stability of the member states or undermine their sovereignty.”⁸⁰ Doha reportedly also agreed to expel 15 Brotherhood members residing in Qatar and to no longer support either the Muslim Brotherhood or the Houthi rebels of Yemen in the future.⁸¹

Thus far, Qatar appears to be adhering to some aspects of the agreement, but it remains unclear whether it will fully respond to the demands of some of its neighbors. It has reportedly begun expelling some Brotherhood members.⁸² Al-Qaradawi has reversed course, expressing his “love” for all Gulf states and clarifying that his statements do not represent the views of the Qatari government.⁸³ Doha has also stated its intention to open another broadcast network, Al Araby, to serve “as a political counterweight” to Al Jazeera’s perceived bias toward the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸⁴

The relatively clear ascendancy of the region’s anti-Brotherhood bloc over the Muslim Brotherhood and its state sponsors has demoralized Brotherhood organizations across the Middle East. Egypt’s coup and subsequent crackdown in particular dampened the morale and ambitions of Brotherhood organizations in Tunisia and Jordan, as well as put a general end to any pretensions that the Brotherhood represented the region’s political and social future.

In Tunisia, Egyptian President Morsi's overthrow had a tangible effect on the calculations of the Brotherhood-affiliated Ennahda movement, which was then locked in a political battle with its non-Islamist rivals. As senior Ennahda leader Abdel Meguid al-Naggar acknowledged, "The coup in Cairo forced us to make concessions here at the negotiating table in Tunis."⁸⁵ The Brotherhood's failure in Egypt provided an impetus for Ennahda to compromise more than it might have in political negotiations with its opponents. In effect, the coup not only removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt but also took away a source of psychological support for Ennahda in Tunisia.

The impact of the anti-Brotherhood bloc's ascendance appears to be even more profound and demoralizing to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the Jordanian Brotherhood interviewed by a CAP research team were defiant against regional trends, but ultimately, they had little beyond rhetoric to justify their attitudes. A leader of the Jordanian Brotherhood claimed the Brotherhood's regional retreat was merely "temporary," pointing to hypothetical future regional developments as his rationale. He and others retreated to statements that the Muslim Brotherhood was "an idea" that could not be extirpated by the Saudi-led anti-Brotherhood bloc.⁸⁶

Lessons for U.S. Middle East policy from the new Middle East cold war

During this turbulent period in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States has been in effect a bystander when it comes to most of the swirling political currents and transitions in the region. This is not to say that the United States is unimportant or not a factor in the region. On the contrary, the United States remains the dominant military power in key parts of the region, particularly in the Gulf. Moreover, when it comes to Iran, counterterrorism, and broader regional security issues, the United States has no rival.

However, the uneven U.S. response to the Arab uprisings and the regional competition that it sparked offers several important lessons that should inform future U.S. policy in the region.

- **The absence of coherent political and ideological alternatives with deep roots in society is a major challenge facing the Middle East and North Africa.**

This is one common thread that runs through many of the countries in the region. Political movements that have been part of the successive waves of transitions lack a clear governing philosophy and coherent ideologies that addresses the economic and social problems that drove many people into the streets in the early days of the Arab uprisings. A long-term challenge for the region is developing multiple centers of ideas, values, and constituency groups that produce policy solutions to the problems facing the region, including progressive ideas for positive change. The old paradigm of Arab nationalism versus traditional Islamism is less relevant to the challenges of today, but a new paradigm has yet to emerge, creating a vacuum for authoritarianism to fill. In some countries, various currents of Salafism compete to fill this gap. While their salience as a political movement remains limited, Salafists are pulling the debate in Islamists circles to the right. More troubling is the rise of jihadi Salafists and their military significance in Syria and Iraq, where recent success on the battlefield may well translate into greater political resonance across the region. The United States should pay closer attention to this political and ideological deficit as it seeks to advance economic and political reform in the region.

- **Egypt is central to the regional competition for influence.** U.S. policy focus on Iran’s nuclear program and countering terrorist groups that may threaten the homeland is appropriate but insufficient. Egypt is the region’s most populous country and remains a center of gravity. U.S. policy on Egypt should move beyond its hedged and muddled stance to more clearly support inclusive political and economic reform as the United States continues to work with Egypt on common regional security objectives.
- **The United States faces considerable challenges in responding to all of the competing political priorities of regional partners.** The United States remains a close military, intelligence, and diplomatic partner of key countries in the region, including Israel, Jordan, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. network of security partners is broad and inclusive—and it includes many of the countries that have been at odds with one another in this new Middle East cold war. Given this dynamic, it becomes more complicated for the United States to advance a cohesive regional strategy. Balancing the competing interests and perspectives of key partners who find themselves on opposite sides of the region’s new cold war is—and will continue to be—difficult in this new landscape. There is no panacea to addressing this challenge, but candid diplomacy with all partners can help ease tensions and concerns.
- **The lack of an overarching, cohesive U.S. strategy that factors in the political and ideological trends surfaced in the Arab uprisings handicaps U.S. engagement.** The reaction of the United States to the Arab uprisings and the latest round of regional, diplomatic, and political competition in the new Middle East cold war has been muted and strategically bereft of a clear statement of U.S. interests and values. As a result, the United States has not been as relevant to the power struggles that have animated the political transitions in the region. U.S. policymakers must be clearer about the interests and values driving their actions and policies in the region. The case-by-case, reactive approach to the events sparked by the Arab uprisings has caused more confusion than necessary.
- **Intensified, structured diplomatic dialogues with multiple regional partners in the region is key to navigating changes.** Quiet and frank diplomacy can help build trust and understanding, even if it does not bridge divides. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been a deeply polarizing experience—not only for Egypt, but also for key countries in the region. It effectively escalated into to a proxy war—one conducted at no small expense. This collective response reveals something important about the common concerns with which

challenges to the legitimacy of ruling regimes are met—a concern that borders on an existential anxiety. Diplomacy could help the United States better understand these anxieties and develop more effective responses. Such diplomacy could lead to greater coordination with regional partners. One challenge in this realm is making partners understand that the issues of security and stability, inclusive and pluralistic political reform, and economic reform are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

- **U.S. public diplomacy matters a great deal, and people and leaders in the region still look to the United States for leadership.** For all of the pessimism and negative perceptions in the region about U.S. Middle East policy, the fast-moving events of the past three years demonstrate that the region still looks to the United States as a key frame of reference and source of support. Russia, China, and other potential competitors to the United States do not come close, and people around the world still look to the United States for leadership and expertise. This desire for U.S. leadership demonstrates that the United States has some ability to affect events in the region; it just needs a smarter and clearer diplomatic engagement strategy. Given the polarized nature of today's Middle East cold war, the United States is likely going to receive more blame and criticism no matter what, but it is in U.S. interests to stand more clearly for the core democratic values and support for basic human rights than it has in the past three years.
- **The United States has yet to find a means to effectively manage the dynamics of the regional conflict over political Islam.** The United States has no overarching policy or message that Islamists or their rivals can understand or factor into their own political calculus. In part, this is due to the fact that the United States has approached the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and related movements on a case-by-case basis framed in country-specific interests—and to some extent, our values. It is also due to the lack of tools to effectively engage political Islam in the multidimensional arenas that matter. Instead, the United States finds itself the prisoner of traditional state-to-state diplomacy abstracted from the social and regional foundations of Islamist movements.
- **Framing U.S. engagement in the Middle East and North Africa as “Muslim world engagement” has potential disadvantages.** One key aspect of U.S. engagement has been public diplomacy. It is remarkable how effectively policymakers and the political discourse in the United States and Europe have implicitly accepted the Islamist worldview and categories of analy-

sis. Invocation of “Muslim communities,” “the world’s Muslims,” “Muslims around the world,” and the “Muslim world” from President Obama on down⁸⁷ reinforces and legitimizes the communal boundaries erected and policed by Islamists worldwide by confining individuals to narrow boxes of religious heritage. To that point, the Obama administration has created special positions for Muslim world engagement.

A more effective framework for engagement would be supporting inclusive, pluralist, and universalist approaches to political transitions in the region. Extremist, retrograde political movements have taken advantage of the political openings presented by the Arab uprisings, and the United States should state more clearly its strategic interests linked to core human rights and basic values that it seeks to support in its policy to the region.

- **The U.S. government lacks sufficient, sound analysis on political Islamists, including their financial support networks.** Since 9/11, the U.S. government has understandably focused its intelligence collection and analysis efforts on violent Islamist organizations that directly target the United States and its allies. But the United States lacks sufficient knowledge on the internal organization and workings of political Islamist groups such as Salafi groups that have risen to the forefront in Syria and Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood. This lack of good intelligence is compounded by the absence of strong strategic analysis on the possible linkages between groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist terrorist groups. The U.S. Treasury Department should devote more resources to tracking and understanding the financial support networks for Islamist groups. This deeper understanding of the rise of political Islamists can contribute to greater clarity about how the United States should respond to new political forces that have emerged in the region and to gauge which ones support U.S. interests and values in the long run.

Conclusion

At a time of change in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States needs reliable and capable partners. Building and maintaining those partnerships is more complicated today given the fragmented regional landscape and the ongoing political changes being driven by demographic, social, and economic pressures. The region has entered what appears to be a prolonged period of transition. The traditional tools of U.S. engagement in the Middle East and North Africa—with a heavy focus on military and security partnerships—remains an important but incomplete response to the challenges in the region today. The deeply polarizing effect of the Arab uprisings on regional dynamics has presented a new layer of challenges for U.S. strategy in the Middle East and North Africa.

During the 2000s, the United States upended a regional strategy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq and sent mixed signals about how it would prioritize political and economic reform in the region. Under President Obama, the United States has taken steps to respond to the mistakes made in the immediate years following the 9/11 attacks, including the errors made in the Iraq War and the resulting increased influence of Iran throughout the region. The Obama administration pursued a different type of engagement with the region: It maintained a strong military footprint and security cooperation in the Gulf as it redeployed U.S. forces from Iraq and pursued an aggressive counterterrorism strategy. But the Obama administration's reactions to the Arab uprisings and the new Middle East cold war that those events sparked has been uneven, and its engagement with political Islamist groups has created confusion about what the United States stands for in terms of core values and interests.

The central challenge in this struggle of today's fragmenting Middle East was the waves of changes in Egypt, the region's most populous country. Egypt's rocky political transition since 2011 has exacerbated long-standing economic problems and negatively affected the country's security environment. The Muslim Brotherhood's meteoric rise and fall from power in less than two years had a destabilizing effect on the country. U.S. policy adopted a cautious and unclear set of responses to these changes.⁸⁸

The lack of clarity in the U.S. responses—in particular, its muted criticisms of how successive governments governed in Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of former President Morsi—contributed to a sense of confusion about U.S. engagement. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood thought the United States was backing their opponents, and the opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood thought the United States was on the other side. Since President Morsi’s ouster and the subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, U.S. policy has remained hesitant and hedged.⁸⁹ Egypt increasingly became central to the struggle in the new Middle East cold war; the U.S. posture contributed to a confidence gap among some key U.S. partners in the region who wanted the United States to pick sides. Moving forward, a renewed focus on adopting a more realistic and clear U.S. policy toward Egypt is crucial.

Beyond Egypt, the impact and experiences of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were quite varied. Tunisia has thus far seen the most stable progress in political reform efforts, and the Muslim Brotherhood stepped down from power there in an ongoing negotiation over power sharing that remains incomplete.⁹⁰ In Tunisia, the United States has played a quiet and constructive role in encouraging pluralism and pragmatic reform, but it should invest time and resources in offering assistance. In Jordan, the government has thus far contained the influence and reach of the Muslim Brotherhood by co-opting the group rather than banning it altogether.

But the worrisome, growing presence and influence of Islamist extremists, including Salafi jihadists in connection with the Syrian civil war and their re-emergence in neighboring Iraq, will test Jordanian and U.S. efforts to contain the spillover from the conflict. Along with Egypt, Syria’s civil war presents one of the greatest strategic challenges to overall regional stability, particularly as the fallout of the conflict spreads into Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. The conflict raging in Iraq and Syria has now taken center stage in this overlapping competition between Shia and Sunni forces and the intra-Sunni Islamist battle across the region.

Given these complicated regional political dynamics, the time has come for a recalibration of overall U.S. policy toward the Middle East. This will require major changes in how the United States examines political and ideological trends and how it diplomatically engages the new centers of power that have emerged across

the region. More than one decade after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the Middle East and North Africa remain the central front in a battle of ideas with some of the most extremist ideologies of the world. A large U.S. military troop presence in Iraq has ended and is not likely to return, and the Obama administration has aggressively gone on the offensive against Al Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and beyond. But the political and ideological battle against some of the most extremist ideas continues.

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Endnotes

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