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NEW SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE MENA REGION

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Should I stay or could I go? Washington's never-ending alliance dilemma in the MENA

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Abstract: Much has been written in the past years about the U.S.'s disengagement from the Middle East and North Africa – be it as a consequence of shifting priorities or as one of many steps on a path towards global decline. For decades, Washington had been the key power broker and unrivaled regional hegemon; a point of reference for those seeking reassurance and support as well as for those seeing U.S. influence in the region as a threat to their own security and self-determination. This article examines traditional and current U.S. security interests, challenges and strategies in the Middle East, focusing particularly on security co-operation patterns between the U.S. and its regional allies, which are predominately driven by fears of entrapment and overbalancing as well as the ambition to seek influence and project power with limited means. Moreover, it explores short- and mid-term policy options for the U.S. to ease its prevailing alliance dilemma in the region.

Introduction

U.S. President Donald Trump's decisions to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran on May 8, 2018 and to move the U.S. embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem raise questions about discontinuity both in U.S. policy and in Trump's own approach to the Middle East, a "troubled place" he just recently sought to leave in "the hands of its own people".[1] While political and military support for the state of Israel and regional containment of Iran had been traditional features of U.S. foreign policy since 1979, most U.S. presidents aimed for a twofold cold peace between Israel and its neighbors on the one hand and Iran as well as its geopolitical and ideological rivals on the other. Without addressing regional rivalries, spiraling polarization and militarization in the region, however, Trump's options for disengaging from the region in a similar manner will remain limited.

U.S. Interests and Strategy in the MENA – Offshore Balancing vs. Heavy Footprint

Over past decades, American interests in the MENA region have involved five general issues: securing and maintaining strategic access to oil in the Persian Gulf, supporting and protecting the state of Israel, defending friendly Arab regimes, maintaining U.S. military bases, and resisting anti-Western insurgents and terrorist groups.[2] Despite a recent strategy of resource diversification through the so-called shale gas revolution, oil still makes up for some 20 percent of U.S. imports, and key allies in Europe, East Asia and in the region remain highly dependent on the flow of Middle East oil. Aiming at preserving all these interests at the same time, the U.S. has invested in a high number of bilateral intergovernmental alignments, inter alia through economic and military assistance and arms transfers (Figure 1).[3]

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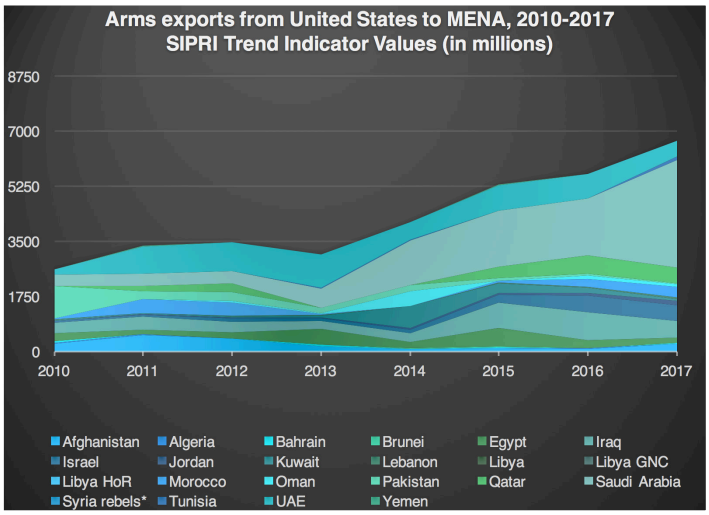
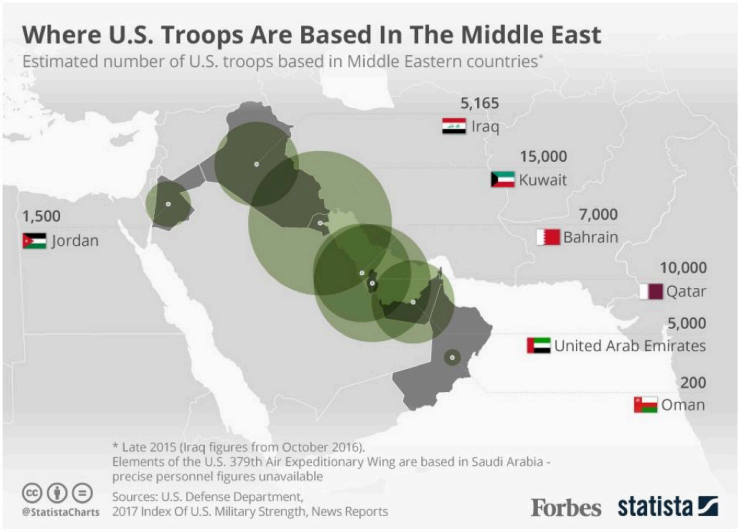
Figure 1



Source: SIPRI

Israel, which is certainly a primus inter pares among U.S. allies, has received, over the past 70 years, $115 billion in military, economic, and diplomatic assistance. In turn and up to the present day, this partnership has helped the U.S. to contain inter alia the spread of weapons of mass destruction through Syria, Iraq and to a certain extent Iran and to contain at that time major stability risks to Israel's Arab neighbors such as Communism, nationalism, and political Islam. When the Vietnam War tied down major U.S. resources in the 1970s, a similar role was ascribed to countries such as Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia as part of Richard Nixon's "twin pillar" policy. From the perspective of U.S. policymakers, in order to turn security consumers into security providers, arms sales and assistance to local allies became a sine qua non for achieving stability.[4]

Figure 2



Source: Statista

Through arms sales, regimes with little if at all democratic legitimacy received prestige and power and exporters gained influence over foreign and security policy decision-making.[5] Arms sales provided on the one hand a convenient tool to project power and contain challenges and generated economic benefits on the other. However, arms sales and military assistance especially through the U.S. after the 1970s retreat by the Soviet Union and in the absence of other major suppliers, developed into a key external resource of domestic political power, contributing to authoritarian persistence and a strong role for the military forces in many of those countries. As it became painfully obvious for Washington in 1979, the twin pillar doctrine was not immune to internal and external shocks; its collapse required a new strategy: In 1983, US CENTCOM had been established to better accommodate to the regional turmoil caused by the Iranian Revolution, the start of the Iran-Iraq war, the Lebanese Civil War and the Soviet Invasion into Afghanistan. Subsequently, four service components and one subordinate unified command had been set up in four Gulf monarchies, including the deployment of currently 35,000 military personnel (Figure 2): US Naval Forces, Middle East as well as US Marine Forces, Middle East

in Bahrain, US Army Forces, Middle East in Kuwait, US Air Forces, Middle East and US Special Operations Command, Middle East in Qatar.[6] Since 1990, the U.S. has intensified and expanded its military footprint in the area. In the following years, however, this would also lead to a situation where the U.S. found itself heavily invested or even entrapped in the political survival of highly repressive regimes confronted by domestic dissent or even insurgencies, particularly amid the rise of al-Qaida and its affiliates.

Dual containment no more and a security dilemma spiraling out of control

Both the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the indifference to the fall of Husni Mubarak by a U.S. president who preferred not to be "on the wrong side of history" by preserving the status quo, led to spiraling confusion and fear among Washington's allies, who now came to believe that the main guarantor of their survival was ready to abandon them when necessary and to replace them with new partners – such as Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood.[7] In a similar vein, and amid growing polarization in the region, distrust was accelerated by the end of the U.S. dual containment policy and Washington's strategy of reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation by seeking an agreement with Iran. For Iran's regional rivals, on high alert over Tehran's conventional weapons arsenal and increasing influence in the region through proxies lined up along a "Shiite Crescent" from Iran to Gaza via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, this policy shift made a mismatch between their and Washington's threat perception apparent. At the same time, insecurity on the Iranian side increased in the context of the Arab uprisings in 2011, as Tehran feared not only the fall of allied regimes but also the risk of a regime-threatening domino effect within their own borders. Just like its regional rivals, however, Iran saw the fragmentation of power inter alia in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and

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Yemen as an opportunity to shape things on the ground through proxy policies.[8] In early 2016, bilateral tensions flared up when the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia led to the ransacking of the Kingdom's embassy in Tehran.[9] In June 2017, the conflict also spilled over into the Gulf Cooperation Council, resulting into a boycott and ongoing blockade of air, sea, and land routes to Qatar, which has, partially in response to its isolation in the GCC, been growing closer to Iran ever since.[10] Regional polarization also manifested itself on the societal level: A Spring 2017 survey in several Arab States showed, that for instance in Lebanon, 75 percent of Sunnis asked held favorable views of Saudi Arabia, yet only one in ten Shia Lebanese felt the same way.[11] In turn, 93 percent of the latter had a positive view of Iran, a position shared by only 16 percent of Sunnis. In Jordan, 83 percent of all people asked held favorable views of Saudi Arabia, while only 4 were in favor or Iran.

This worsening security dilemma can also be observed on the military level: For decades, the Middle East has constituted a prime example of a multidimensional security dilemma driving militarization and conflict. Weak state and regional institutions have failed to solve manifest disputes on interstate and intrastate levels, trapping elites and societies in endemic conflict and outright war. Repeatedly, instability in the region has been triggered by weak or repressive regimes who have struggled to manage the core socio-economic and political demands of their populations. Out of the 420 million people living in the 21 countries of the Middle East, only five percent enjoy political rights and civil liberties, amid a complete lack of

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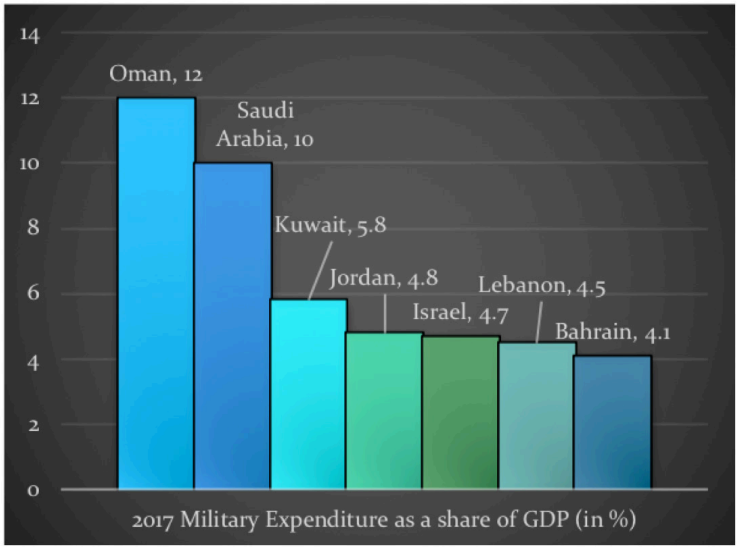
media freedom. This domestic insecurity and constant risk of regime overthrow has traditionally shifted the power balance in favor of the military and security services. The endemic state of interstate political conflict, most prominently between Israel and its Arab neighbors as well as Iran on the one hand and post-1979 Iran and Gulf monarchies on the other, have also contributed to this, triggering the need for a comparatively rapid build-up of professional military forces. A third feature of (in-)security and militarization in the region is its weakness in the face of external interference: In 2017, eleven highly violent or even war-like political conflicts were fought within or between MENA states, hardly any without the direct or indirect intervention of neighboring, regional and extra regional powers.[12] Insurgents fighting in Syria and Yemen continue to find safe havens, political and military supporters beyond the initial conflict zone and pressured regimes in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have frequently invited regional and global powers to defend the status quo militarily. As one result of this development, the MENA Region is today one of the most heavily militarized zones in the world, currently hosting seven of the world's top ten military spenders, and carrying the by far highest military burden (5.2% of GDP) worldwide (Figure 3).[13] In 2017 alone, the region's biggest spenders, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, rapidly increased military expenditure by 9.2, 22, and 19 percent respectively.[14] According to SIPRI data, arms imports to the Middle East have doubled over the last decade and have accounted for a third of all arms imports worldwide since 2013.[15]

Figure 3



Source: SIPRI

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U.S. interests are at stake

The threat to U.S. interests emerging from these developments is real: Any confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is likely to affect the Strait of Hormuz; the latter has announced a major buildup of its naval forces; and allied Houthi rebels have threatened to target Saudi oil facilities from Yemen. Iran's increased ability to project political and military power directly to Israel's northern borders with Syria and Lebanon has increased the risk of confrontation beyond limited skirmishes in southern Syria. Several Arab regimes have decreased their level of commitment to U.S.-led efforts in the fight against ISIS or turned to alternative extra-regional allies in order to increase both their power position vis-à-vis domestic and regional threats as well as their leverage in their alliance with Washington.[16] Especially the recent Turkish, Egyptian and Saudi rapprochement with Russia raised concerns

about the security of U.S. troops in the region in the short- and the "friendliness" of these states vis-à-vis U.S. interests in the long-term.[17] Eventually, according to former U.S. Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, if the U.S. fails to contain this dynamic, "Sunni populations [will] embrace groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda for self-protection".[18]

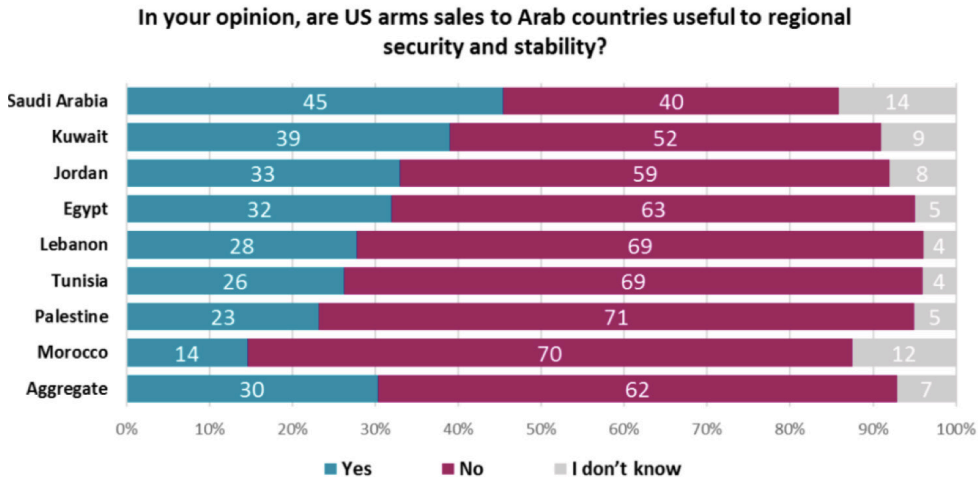
What should be the U.S. response to this? When asked in 2016, Obama rejected the idea of a rollback strategy against Iran and recommended instead an offshoring balancing "cold peace" strategy – an indirect power-sharing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia

What should be the U.S. response to this? When asked in 2016, Obama rejected the idea of a rollback strategy against Iran and recommended instead an offshoring balancing "cold peace" strategy – an indirect power-sharing agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given the alternative scenario of armed and prolonged confrontation between Iran and militarily inferior Gulf countries, which "would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores," Obama assumed that his approach would – if implemented – allow the U.S. to secure their traditional interest at a minimum cost.[19] However, Obama's attempts to facilitate such a rapprochement inter alia during the fight against ISIS failed to decrease distrust between the blocs, nurturing additional fears of abandonment among his allies and concerns in Iran about potential U.S. entrapment in a Saudi or Israeli-initiated escalation. Tehran, hence, seized the chance of compartmentalizing its relations with the West offered by the JCPOA negotiations, exercising restraint only on the nuclear file but did not change its policy regarding other regional issues of interest of U.S. and its allies.[20]

How could the U.S. help in de-escalating inter-state tensions and limiting regional militarization?

In the past months, the MENA policies of Donald Trump have been seen as a spectacular move towards chaos rather than a coherent approach helping to both de-escalate inter-state tensions and limit militarization in the region. Quite the opposite, many would subscribe to the idea that the administration's clear and hardline stance against Iran beyond the JCPOA has emboldened confrontational steps by Saudi Arabia and their allies, e.g. against Qatar and Lebanon, which could easily lead to more instability.[21] High-level state visits and debates about arms deals have clearly aimed at restoring the trust of traditional allies in Israel and the Gulf, yet uncertainty about the future of the U.S. military presence in Syria and Iraq as well as Washington's strategy or even willingness to counter Iranian power expansion in the region remains high.[22]

Figure 4



Source: Arab Center Washington DC

The U.S. needs to find a balance between restoring trust on an intergovernmental level on the one hand and encouraging its local allies to increase breathing space for pluralist civil societies, normalize civil-military relations and address corruption and reform needs on the other

In the coming months and its efforts to renegotiate U.S.-Iran relations, the Trump administration should take Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's claim that "our goal is to protect the American people" seriously and aim at regional polarization and instability as factors conducive to Iranian power expansion and a threat to U.S. interests per se. Containing conflict and strengthening institutions remain the only path towards solving the trade-off between U.S. security interests and the desire for physical withdrawal. Since 2011, unmanaged polarization has made regional states more permissive of non-U.S. interference and triggered the self-defeating rationale that if the U.S. would uphold e.g. political and ethical conditionality in arms sales, rival powers would happily step in and undermine Washington's own interests.[23] However, in a regionwide survey among Arab populations in October 2017, the overwhelming majority of those surveyed stated that they do not see U.S. arms sales to regional leaders as conducive to regional security and stability (Figure 4).[24] Instead, the U.S. should engage in a broader discussion with their allies about domestic and regional power rather than one just about military capabilities alone. In contrast to the counterproductive pressure on Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri to end his coalition government with Hezbollah, Saudi efforts to reach out to the Shiite leaders of Iraq, among them Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi and popular Cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, have helped both to run on a rather cross-sectarian platform in recent elections. In a similar vein, the U.S. needs to find a balance between restoring trust on an intergovernmental level on the one hand and encouraging its local allies to increase breathing space for pluralist civil societies, normalize civil-military relations and address corruption and reform needs on the other. In another balancing act, Washington needs to rally international support for a tougher and comprehensive stance against Iran and at the same time to send decisive signals of restraint to its regional allies, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel. Beyond the JCPOA, Iran's ballistic missile program and hostage releases, the Trump administration demands from Tehran to cease support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, the Afghan Taliban, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq as well as withdrawing all Iranian troops from Syria. Even if Iran could be convinced to abandon a single one of these highly effective proxies or walk away from its biggest military success in Syria, the U.S. so far lacks a coherent political strategy to fill any of the voids an Iranian exit would produce in the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq or Syria, notwithstanding further destabilization if former Iranian proxies radicalize in a battle for survival. Hence, even a more assertive U.S. administration needs to maintain direct channels of communications with Tehran and keep a seat at the table open for an Iran that is, according to Trump himself, "willing to be a partner for peace."[25] In order to make sure that this table still exists by the time the Iranians might come around, Washington should signal to the Saudi camp that its patience with foreign policy adventurism is limited, especially with the horrendous Yemen war in the background and the risk of further intra-GCC conflict, and send similar signals to Israel. While a rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia can certainly help to ease tensions between key actors in the region, a twin pillar policy of containing Iran militarily without U.S. balancing is highly risky and could incite major conflict in the region.

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ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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