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## Opportunities for American Influence in a Changing Middle East *A Response to the Declinists*

POLICY BRIEF



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### Is American Influence in the Middle East and North Africa Declining?

For decades, analysts of U.S. foreign policy have debated whether American influence around the world is declining. The most recent manifestation of this perennial discussion revolves around the question of American influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings.<sup>1</sup> Even earlier, as the U.S. military ended its seven-year presence in Iraq, some questioned why this presence could not stanch Iraqi civil and sectarian strife. The perception of America's declining influence has deepened since the hopeful early months of the 2011 Arab uprisings gave way to the violent transitions that have ensued. With the United States facing narrowing policy options in Syria, a counterrevolution in Egypt and political paralysis from Libya to Bahrain, it is understandable why some have concluded that Washington may be less effective in its efforts to advance U.S. interests in the region.<sup>2</sup>

As Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns recently noted, the region between the Maghreb and the Strait of Hormuz is where "U.S. policymakers learn humility the hard way."<sup>3</sup> To be fair, U.S. policy efforts represent only one of the many factors that shape outcomes in the MENA region, which is home to nearly 450 million people living in the Arab League states, Iran and Israel. The region is

in flux, in part because of new types of sectarian strife, economic stagnation and public mobilization occurring inside MENA states.<sup>4</sup>

This paper reexamines whether U.S. influence in MENA is declining and finds that this thesis is an oversimplification of the issue. Instead, U.S. policy efforts have in some cases influenced the decision-making of MENA leaders over the past five years. At other times, they have not. To evaluate U.S. influence requires analyzing the concrete tools used by U.S. policymakers to shape outcomes in the region. This paper argues that the negative tools, the "sticks," have yielded limited outcomes over the past five years. While these outcomes are observable, they are rarely sufficient to achieve overall U.S. strategic goals. The positive tools, the "carrots" that are often used to reward, persuade and induce MENA governments toward outcomes desired by the United States have been effective in some cases more than in others. Yet the outcomes of these positive tools are typically unobservable in the short term.

Given the increasing pressures of budget austerity, and the realistic limitations on using coercive tools, U.S. policymakers will increasingly rely on the four positive levers discussed in this paper: private diplomacy and persuasion, public diplomacy, civilian assistance in the form of economic support funds, and military assistance and training.

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Though this list is not an exhaustive list of positive tools, when taken together these four tools command a significant percentage of U.S. policymakers' time and resources across the defense, diplomatic and development realms. If U.S. policymakers want to ensure the smartest return on their investment, they would do well to analyze how these four tools are currently working – measuring their impact and then sharpening their deployment in the changing MENA region. A new policy paradigm that demands a clearer understanding of how each tool is leading to desired outcomes would also allow U.S. policymakers to integrate these four tools with each other and with other U.S. and allied tools in a comprehensive, strategic manner.

While American foreign policymakers seek a range of outcomes in the MENA region, this paper considers only one in particular – whether U.S. efforts have moved the decisionmaking of MENA leaders in a direction more favorable to U.S. interests. U.S. policymakers are productively engaged in a range of other efforts beyond the scope of this paper, including supporting MENA's private sector and civil society and raising regional health, education, and employment standards and opportunities.

### **Defining Influence**

The declining influence hypothesis suffers from inconsistently applied and often vague definitions of the term “influence,” within both policy and

academic circles.<sup>5</sup> Many use the term influence when what they mean is a very narrow conceptualization of U.S. power defined as capabilities – that is, the relative size of the U.S. economy and defense spending levels.<sup>6</sup> The United States remains the preeminent global power militarily, with 2014 U.S. defense spending levels nearly four times those of its nearest competitor (China).<sup>7</sup> U.S. military spending is over 150 times Egypt's defense spending and 13 times Saudi Arabia's defense spending. In fact, U.S. military spending is nearly 10 times that of the whole MENA region – Arab and Israeli – combined.<sup>8</sup> Economically, U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) is over four times the combined total GDP of the MENA region.<sup>9</sup> These facts suggest the persistence, rather than the decline, of America's relative capabilities in the region.

What may be changing, however, is the region's *perception* of U.S. power, particularly amid Gulf states' fears of abandonment, triggered by the drawdown of U.S. troops from Iraq and intensified by the prediction of decreasing U.S. dependence on MENA-based energy resources. These fears were exacerbated by a misperception that a U.S. pivot to Asia would reduce U.S. security guarantees to MENA states. The announcement of U.S.-Iranian negotiations in 2013 added to these concerns, leading many in the region to worry that they would be left vulnerable to Iran's hegemonic aspirations. When allies from Israel to Saudi Arabia consider the faltering American economy and Department of Defense (DOD) budget changes that reduce military readiness and personnel, they assume a declining American willingness to commit forces and project military and economic power to the region in perpetuity.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, U.S. influence in MENA is partly a function of the murky and hard-to-measure perception of U.S. power by both regional allies and adversaries. Other analysts trying to gauge

U.S. influence in the region have also considered the changing appeal of U.S. soft power in MENA over time as compared to the effects of U.S. hard power.<sup>11</sup>

A more tangible way of defining the multipronged elements of influence is to consider each of the constitutive tools that enable foreign policy practitioners to translate American capabilities into outcomes. (When U.S. policymakers influence outcomes, MENA leaders or states typically make decisions that they may not otherwise have made.) These concrete tools range from coercive levers to positive incentives rooted in American diplomacy and assistance. While these instruments are not the sum total of U.S. influence, analyzing how these negative and positive levers are working offers a starting point for considering U.S. influence in MENA over the past five years.

### **Are the “Sticks” Any Duller? The Limited Effectiveness of Coercive Levers**

U.S. coercive strategies, its “sticks,” have had mixed success over the past 10 years. On one hand, the 2003 war in Iraq left many pessimistic about – and uncomfortable with – the use of U.S. coercion to shape MENA governmental outcomes. The seven-year U.S. military presence in Iraq, which surged at its greatest height to nearly 160,000 U.S. troops, thousands of allied troops and thousands of U.S. civilians on the ground, was unable to stabilize the country militarily, or bring together warring sectarian factions into a sustainable political accord. U.S. military power swiftly toppled Saddam Hussein, but in his wake, the U.S. military and civilian presence proved unable to end civil conflict or to prod the weak post-war governments toward political consensus. In fact, America’s challenges in shaping Iraqi political outcomes in an enduring fashion may have been a seminal factor contributing to the regional perception of declining U.S. influence and power. The

failure of the Obama administration to reach an agreement to leave a small residual U.S. military presence in Iraq beyond 2011 may have worsened this perception.

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America’s challenges in Iraq may have called into question whether American military force could affect political outcomes. Nevertheless, in the years since the invasion of Iraq, Washington has wielded a number of more limited coercive levers that have effectively advanced U.S. interests, particularly in the short term. First, the U.S. government has successfully captured and killed core al Qaeda (AQ) leaders across the MENA region, in some cases working with regional allies and in other cases acting unilaterally, using new types of operational capacities, including drones.<sup>12</sup> Of course, this is limited success in the overall context of global counterterrorism efforts; even as the United States has limited the threat from core al Qaeda in Pakistan and Yemen, new AQ affiliates are emerging throughout the region, including in North Africa. Nonetheless, in achieving limited counterterrorism objectives – by killing or capturing those who are the most committed to striking the U.S. homeland – the Obama administration has shown how a coercive lever can be successful in a targeted, though limited, manner.

Second, a NATO-led coalition stopped Moammar Gadhafi from slaughtering thousands more Libyan

citizens. While securing a democratic transition in Libya remains difficult, the use of limited military intervention, through a multilateral coalition, to quickly topple Gadhafi, one of MENA's longest-serving dictators, proved to be effective. Third, the U.S. successfully erected and enforced crippling unilateral and multilateral sanctions against Iran. As a direct result of U.S. and international sanctions, by late 2013 Iran's rial lost around 60 percent of its 2011 value against the dollar, while the official inflation rate rose to around 38 percent. Additionally, Iran's oil exports fell by 60 percent between 2012 and 2014. For the first time in 20 years, Iran was in a recession for two consecutive years during this period.<sup>13</sup> This economic downturn played a prominent role in the election of Iran's moderate new president, Hassan Rouhani, as well as in Tehran's willingness to make the first concessions on its nuclear program in a decade in exchange for sanctions relief.

Finally, President Obama's coercive diplomacy – his threat to use force against Syria in September 2013 – achieved additional meaningful change in Damascus and Moscow. Obama's threat led to the swift diplomatic agreement between the U.S. and Russia regarding the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons. Of course, debate will persist regarding the effects of the president's unfulfilled threat to use force to uphold his “red line” against chemical weapons use. In the short term, however, coercive diplomacy led to a tangible decision by Syrian President Bashar al-Asad that advanced specific U.S. goals regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

In short, over the past five years, despite the shadow of the American drawdown from Iraq, U.S. coercion has directly yielded measurable outcomes that have enhanced U.S. security in the MENA region. While U.S. policymakers do not want coercive tools to be the primary means of American influence

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in the region, tools such as limited military operations, economic coercion and coercive diplomacy have generated the desired outcomes in a limited sense. All of these outcomes share in common the measurability of success or failure, particularly in the short term. In a short period after the coercive interventions discussed above, U.S. policymakers could point to Osama bin Laden's death, the end of Gadhafi's rule and the punishing toll of sanctions on the Iranian economy as examples of concrete outcomes. Of course, AQ is on the rise in Syria and Iraq, and Libya remains deeply insecure, reflecting that these coercive efforts are insufficient to achieve overall U.S. strategic objectives.

### **Do the “Carrots” Still Work? Opportunities for Using Positive Levers to Shape MENA Decisionmaking**

Compared with coercive levers, it is harder to know for certain when positive, incentive-based levers deployed in MENA succeed in advancing specific outcomes and when they do not. The following four positive levers are chosen here because they comprise a significant share of the daily work of diplomats and development and defense officials in the MENA region, and they command the majority of U.S. financial resources, billions of dollars in the foreign affairs budget: private diplomacy, public diplomacy, civilian assistance and training programs, and military assistance and training programs. (This list is not exhaustive. For example, U.S. leadership in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations or the World

Bank represents an additional lever reinforcing the above tools.)

There are significant systemic impediments involved in assessing whether these tools have influenced outcomes in support of U.S. interests. Policymakers find it difficult to know whether the positive intervention that they have used, whether diplomatic or programmatic, was decisive in determining a given MENA state decision, since such decisions are often the result of a range of factors. Imagining how a situation would have evolved absent U.S. diplomacy or assistance, and whether that absence would have led to a divergent outcome, relies on too many unknowns. Nonetheless, the changing MENA region provides some evidence of how these four positive levers are translating U.S. power into positive outcomes, as well as the new constraints and opportunities involved.

#### PRIVATE DIPLOMACY IN AN ERA OF MENA DOMESTIC UPHEAVAL

From Thomas Barclay to Henry Kissinger, U.S. officials have relied on private meetings with MENA heads of state as mechanisms for persuasion, seeking to align interests and policies and to wring concessions from allies and foes alike.<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the realm of diplomatic statecraft has focused on international security matters – e.g., convincing the Moroccans or Egyptians to vote with the United States at the United Nations, the Saudis to arrest certain terrorism suspects, or the Emiratis to implement U.N. sanctions against Iran. Over the past few decades, private diplomacy has also involved the more sensitive task of persuading foreign officials to make political and economic reforms at home. Senior officials' visits, U.S. Embassy meetings and the work of MENA regional experts at the DOD and the State Department constitute hundreds of private diplomatic interventions with MENA governments weekly.

Over the past five years, State Department and DOD officials confirm an increase in the quantity of private diplomatic meetings with MENA government officials, particularly because a wider range of U.S. senior officials, representing agencies beyond State and DOD, are visiting the region.<sup>16</sup> There is often enormous effort invested in this lever: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made 14 separate trips to the MENA region over four years. Secretary of State John Kerry, in 2013, visited the region 10 separate times, with the majority of these visits focused on the Middle East Peace Process.<sup>17</sup> (These travel logs do not take into account the many high-level private meetings on MENA issues that often take place in London or Geneva, among other places.)

Evaluating the effectiveness of these private meetings is difficult absent clear information about how these messages persuade their recipients in MENA governments. It is easy to identify a number of new constraints on this lever, however.<sup>18</sup> First, since September 11, 2001, and particularly since the September 2012 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, heightened security threats have limited the activities of embassy officers in the MENA region. To sustain high-level private diplomacy, lower-level diplomats at U.S. Embassies must frequently meet with a range of contacts, both to feed up messages for the high-level summits and to follow through on commitments reached during secretarial-level meetings. This is true whether the U.S. diplomats are trying to secure local business contracts with American companies, or to urge the host government to sign on to international agreements, to enforce U.S. and bilateral sanctions, or to encourage host government officials to stop jailing their political opponents. In short, a constrained security environment may limit the effectiveness of private diplomacy statecraft over time.

Second, democratization itself – which is often nonlinear and chaotic – may also challenge effective U.S. private diplomacy in the region. There once was a static, highly exclusive set of powerbrokers that made decisions within most MENA states. In a changing region, particularly the four states undergoing some sort of political transition, the number of deciders is growing and often hard to predict. In countries such as Tunisia or Yemen, for instance, it is hard to identify which advisors have the ear of the decisionmaker, who will introduce a bill into the legislative body and who will reform the police forces.

U.S. private diplomacy is also harder in the nontransitioning states, such as the Gulf states and Algeria, where leaders are paranoid about foreign intervention and more inwardly focused on regime survival. Regime elites in Bahrain interested in riding out the protests there or Saudi princes interested in a smooth set of monarchical successions may be less interested than they once were in what U.S. diplomats have to say about international issues, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They are also likely to respond defiantly when U.S. diplomats raise talking points on domestic matters such as political reform that raise issues of existential concern for the regime in question.

Despite these constraints, the past 10 years have witnessed some structural changes that are likely to improve the effectiveness of private diplomacy. On the American side, a large post-September 11, 2001 cohort of Foreign Service officers and defense and development personnel has served across the MENA region and has studied Arabic. At one point, Embassy Baghdad, the largest U.S. embassy in the world, had 2,000 personnel under Chief of Mission authority and thousands more supporting them.<sup>19</sup> Members of this cohort, now rising toward leadership positions across the civilian and military

national security agencies, are comfortable navigating MENA sectarian issues, regional conflict, political parties and security sector reform – among the host of other foreign and domestic issues that are the crux of private diplomatic interactions in the region. Likewise, diplomats from the region are increasingly sophisticated regarding U.S. culture and institutions, diplomatic norms and domestic politics. Many of these diplomats studied in the United States. In short, the number of cultural barriers hampering successful private diplomacy between the U.S. and MENA is declining.

Yet, despite the new constraints and opportunities, understanding and improving the effectiveness of civilian and military diplomacy will remain challenging. Even if a MENA government makes a policy decision in line with U.S. diplomatic messages – such as supporting a Middle East Peace Process initiative or in enforcing U.N. or U.S. sanctions – it is unclear if this decision is a result of U.S. private interventions. When private diplomacy is not succeeding, American officials react with frustration but often find it difficult to refine their diplomatic messaging, whether the content or the process of delivery, in order to enhance its impact.

Egypt is a case in point. U.S. officials found it challenging to convince Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to let go of power in February 2011. Moreover, although direct diplomacy with the Egyptian military – especially by Pentagon officials – appears to have influenced its decision to show restraint in the face of mass protests, Washington had difficulty in shaping the military's governance decisions in the aftermath of Mubarak's departure. For example, during this period, the U.S. could not dissuade the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (the military authority overseeing the transition) from allowing a bilateral crisis to unfold over the issue of U.S. assistance to international and Egyptian nongovernmental organizations.

Frustration again characterized U.S. private diplomacy with civilian President Mohammad Morsi himself, who, despite being freely elected in the 2012 historic election, was unable to capitalize on widespread initial support to govern by consensus, rather than protect the interests of the insular Muslim Brotherhood leadership that had helped to bring him to power. Morsi seemed impervious to U.S. diplomatic entreaties urging inclusive governance and economic reform – for the sake of Egyptian stability and prosperity and for the sake of convergent U.S. and Egyptian interests. Finally, in June and July of 2013, even U.S. military channels were unsuccessful in dissuading the Egyptian military from supporting the coup against Morsi.

The Egypt experience, as well as other cases of challenging private diplomacy over the course of the past five years, has led to a perception particularly rife within the U.S. government that private diplomacy with some MENA leaders, particularly focused on matters of MENA domestic politics, may prove to be futile.<sup>20</sup> And yet, despite this view, diplomats will have no choice but to rely on private diplomacy as their primary lever to advance U.S. policy priorities in the region. Indeed, all three of the MENA priorities that President Obama emphasized in his September 2013 speech to the United Nations General Assembly – pursuing Arab-Israeli peace, responding to the Syrian crisis, and confronting the Iranian nuclear threat – will continue to rely heavily on private diplomatic levers.

Given the importance of private diplomacy to U.S. statecraft, it is critical to begin a more systematic evaluation of how it is working in a changing MENA region in order to improve its strategic value.<sup>21</sup> Such an evaluation would study how messages are delivered (e.g., by whom, to whom) and correlate this information to an evaluation of positive and negative outcomes. Causal inferences are probably impossible but correlations could be

helpful. Declassified cables, meeting notes and demarches offer the potential for a database based on coded information of the majority of the private messages passed through military and civilian diplomatic channels. Any measurement or evaluation project would also need to consider a) whether private diplomacy is more successful on international security issues as compared to questions of internal, domestic MENA politics, as many hypothesize and b) the extent to which all civilian and military personnel working under Chief of Mission authorities are reaffirming the high-level messages and printed demarches in their daily interactions with lower-level officials.

#### THE POTENTIAL OF CONSISTENT PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Public diplomatic leverage is in fact the composite of dozens of smaller levers, including public statements issued by the State Department, White House and other agencies; press conferences given by principal officials and their spokespeople; congressional testimony; ambassadorial speeches given within a country; and a host of social media tools, ranging from the Twitter feeds of the U.S. ambassador in each country to State Department blogs and websites. Whereas private diplomacy entails a highly exclusive channel of meetings between bilateral and multilateral senior officials and their staffs, public diplomacy is a lever that is far more accessible to the U.S. and MENA publics.

U.S. foreign policy since the 2011 Arab uprisings has offered ample evidence that MENA governments and their publics carefully scrutinize U.S. public diplomatic statements. Whether these statements are changing outcomes that advance U.S. interests is harder to gauge. For instance, when President Obama mentioned Bahrain in passing in a number of public addresses, both the Bahraini government and the opposition reacted, often divergently.<sup>22</sup> During the first few weeks of

the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the MENA public, the Egyptian government and military, and Egypt's neighbors carefully parsed the wording and tone of every statement coming out of the White House, DOD and the State Department. Senior policy-makers use such statements, as well as the host of other public diplomacy tools, in order to explain complicated diplomatic messages, such as: Jordan is a critical partner, and it is precisely because of the U.S.-Jordanian strategic alliance and our joint interest in stability that we expect the King to undertake political and economic reforms. These tools are also used to convey nuanced changes to U.S. policy. At other times, public diplomacy levers help the U.S. government to signal directly to the MENA publics in order to put pressure on allies and foes alike. President Obama's speech to Israeli students in March 2013 and his Nowruz messages to the Iranian people are salient examples.

The widespread attention – and reaction – to U.S. public diplomacy efforts is therefore immediately evident in most cases. It is less clear how this tool is moving decisionmaking in MENA states. It is readily apparent when public diplomacy *fails* to achieve its desired end goals, particularly when presidential speeches or statements do not lead to the desired outcomes. For example, despite some expectations to the contrary, President Obama's August 19, 2011, announcement that “the time has come for President Asad to step aside” has not to date led to Asad's ouster. This Syria example, however, raises the key question of how the effectiveness of the public diplomacy lever should be measured. When Asad eventually leaves power, the U.S. policy shift of 2011 that included a public call for his exit may be traced causally, over many years, to the decisive ways in which the Syrian conflict ends.

It is likely that the U.S. government's public messaging is most effective when it is consistently focused on achievable state decisions on a much

smaller scale than calling for a sitting dictator to depart. Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, the U.S. has used speeches and press statements to focus on particular human rights concerns that generally enjoy public support in the country in question. For example, through statements and press briefings, the U.S. government (and the international community) urged Bahrain to fairly try the dozens of Shia doctors and nurses incarcerated after the March-April 2011 protests there.<sup>23</sup> According to some observers, the international response to the medics' cases contributed to the decision in June 2012 to acquit nine of the held medics and reduce the sentences of many others.<sup>24</sup>

In short, public diplomacy is a useful tool for U.S. policy communications, especially as a signaling and communications function, and likely most effective when the messages are specific and consistent. U.S. statements criticizing very particular behaviors that violate international norms, in situations where MENA governments are compromising their citizens' rights and aspirations – and where there is widespread, local condemnation of the violations – are most likely to be effective. Determining the impact of the range of public diplomacy tools on various types of outcomes, whether decisionmaking on national security or domestic issues, would require more sophisticated analysis – in particular by measuring how MENA governments are receiving these messages.<sup>25</sup>

#### **CIVILIAN ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING: SHAPING INCENTIVES OVER THE LONGER TERM**

For the fiscal year 2015, the Obama administration requested from Congress nearly \$1.5 billion in economic support funds (ESF) for MENA, a large percentage of the \$5 billion in ESF funding it requested globally.<sup>26</sup> There are a number of additional types of U.S. civilian foreign assistance given to MENA states and societies, including the over \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance that the United



States has provided to the Syrian people since the 2011 crisis and the significant U.S.-supported public health programs in the region. Yet the ESF is the largest standing, non-emergency bilateral assistance mechanism that the United States provides to MENA, and it is designed to strengthen the capacity of MENA governments to distribute public goods, to oversee stable economies, to build institutions, and to meet the aspirations of their people.<sup>27</sup>

The ESF seeks to shape the incentive structure in which MENA governments make decisions, and to buttress U.S.-MENA governmental ties. In a few cases, such as in Jordan, over half of the ESF is deposited as a cash transfer, from the U.S. Treasury into the Jordanian government's budget.<sup>28</sup> In much of the region, a bilateral memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the host government allows U.S. ESF funds to support projects run by the local ministries, such as the Egyptian Water Regulatory Authority and the Ministry of Housing or the Moroccan Ministry of Education, for example. These agreements mean that U.S. development officials and specialists work bilaterally with the host government on poverty alleviation, environmental issues, trade and customs issues, education and small business development. For the fiscal year 2015, the ESF funds will primarily support those MENA countries considered by the World Bank to be either medium income or low income, as well as those with geostrategic importance to the United States: the West Bank and Gaza, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. For example, the 2015 request includes over \$900 million in ESF for the West Bank, Gaza, Egypt and Jordan alone.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas public and private diplomatic levers are typically understudied levers of U.S. influence, civilian assistance programs are often overburdened by the numerous evaluation and impact assessments mandated by Congress. These analyses

carefully monitor how U.S. taxpayer funds are improving Egyptian irrigation levels, Jordanian health outcomes or Yemeni literacy rates, for example.<sup>30</sup> While there are many evaluations, few of them can definitively conclude that U.S. civilian assistance had a causal rather than correlative effect on the local government's decisionmaking or aggregate societal outcomes. Even when ESF programs are subtly designed to reshape MENA government outcomes, it would take years to know whether and how certain programs led to the desired effects.

Moreover, while ESF in practice supports development and democratization goals, its allocation is often a reflection of larger geopolitical strategic objectives. Egypt and Israel were once the largest ESF recipients in MENA, after the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty codified this aid as part of the U.S. investment in peace. In 1994, after the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, American began appropriating additional ESF as a similar reward to the Jordanian government. Reflecting the growing importance of Jordanian-American cooperation, in 2008, in a first of its kind agreement, the United States promised to provide Jordan \$330 million in ESF annually for five years.<sup>31</sup>

However, the political upheaval in the region since the 2011 Arab uprisings has exposed the constraints of using civilian assistance in the form of ESF as a lever to urge MENA governments toward U.S. preferred outcomes. First, the U.S. will never be able to offer transitioning or developing MENA countries the same level of economic assistance as other actors, such as Gulf states, that often do not share Washington's reform agenda. Since 2011, some of the Gulf states have shown their willingness to use billions of dollars in civilian assistance to shape the politics of transitioning states. In Egypt, the U.S. sought to use ESF in various ways to urge the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and then the Morsi government to make responsible decisions,

particularly related to economic reform but also related to governance issues. Gulf states undermined American efforts by employing their own funds at cross-purposes.

Second, even if a small amount of American ESF can open up access to larger sums for recipient countries from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or other sources, such multilateral economic support is sometimes unattractive because of the conditionality involved. For example, from 2012 through 2013, U.S. officials tried to entice Morsi to accept an IMF loan by offering U.S. ESF as a reward. But the IMF package required Morsi's government to make painful economic reforms in the form of subsidy cuts that may have generated greater instability in Egypt. Even a loan with the weakest of strings attached was unappealing.

In the short term, U.S. policymakers should take better care to evaluate how ESF is actually changing MENA governmental decisions. Superficially, it seems that even direct budget support, of the type that has increased to the Jordanian government since the 2011 Arab uprisings – while helping to alleviate Jordan's economic crisis – has not decisively affected the local calculations regarding political or economic reform, even though both issues are part of the long-term, sustainable solution to the economic crisis in the first place. Policymakers should assess to what extent the ESF has augmented U.S.-Jordanian cooperation around national security issues, given the convergence in the two countries' perceptions of regional threats and challenges and the fact that the Jordanians consider U.S. support on Syria, counterterrorism, the Peace Process, and other issues as vital to their own stability.

Over the long term, moreover, there are even greater opportunities to assess how U.S. ESF is advancing U.S. aims in MENA states, particularly its effect on these states' institutional, political and economic reform. Without understanding how ESF

aligns incentives, rewards and empowers domestic reformers, and brings about closer cooperation with the U.S., the use of ESF as a strategic tool will remain limited.<sup>32</sup>

#### **MILITARY ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING: MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS**

Of the positive levers comprising elements of U.S. influence, the largest investment financially involves a package of military assistance and training funds and arms sales to MENA states, the most significant being foreign military assistance (FMF), foreign military sales (FMS) and the International Military Education and Training program (IMET). In 2012, this package of military assistance and trainings (MAT) to the MENA states, as a whole, constituted over 30 percent of the global MAT allocated in the U.S. budget; the FMF to the region alone surpassed 70 percent of the entire U.S. FMF funds appropriated that year in the budget.<sup>33</sup> The particulars within the MAT package to each MENA state vary, depending on the size of the state, its security needs and its wealth, with almost all of the FMF going to Iraq, Egypt, Israel and Jordan and the FMS largely to Israel, Egypt and the Gulf states.<sup>34</sup>

Over the past decade U.S. officials have increasingly employed MAT packages as an instrument that they hope will advance overall U.S. strategic interests in MENA.<sup>35</sup> Foreign military assistance, trainings, exercises, and arms sales represent nearly 70 percent of all U.S. assistance allocated to the MENA region and the numbers are growing.<sup>36</sup> For fiscal year 2015, the Obama administration has requested from Congress \$4.8 billion in FMF for MENA states.<sup>37</sup> Egypt has received \$60 billion in FMF since 1979.<sup>38</sup> The IMET request for the MENA region has grown over 25 percent between 2013 and 2015.<sup>39</sup> FMS to the region varies based on country and year, but in 10 weeks during the summer of 2013, the Pentagon notified Congress

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of \$13 billion in prospective FMS to MENA states, the majority going to Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>40</sup> Overall, while DOD oversees the particulars of the FMF, FMS and IMET activities, the State Department is responsible for FMF and IMET allocations and FMS decisions, reflecting that these funds seek to advance strategic national security interests.<sup>41</sup> In short, this lever is supposed to be a State Department-led tool of U.S. foreign policy statecraft, even if more tactical and operational considerations are often involved.

Despite the increasing investments in MAT over the past five to 10 years in MENA, there are three related – and yet unresolved – questions about how these tools can be successful levers of U.S. influence.

First, MAT offers a principal way to help prod MENA militaries and the governments that they serve to support America's enduring interests in the region, from counterterrorism to counterproliferation. Indeed, the earliest MAT assistance sought to advance Israeli-Arab peace, and nearly 90 percent of U.S. FMF to MENA today goes to Israel and Egypt as part of the U.S. commitments made in the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty.<sup>42</sup> The return on this investment is concrete: in the 35 years since the treaty was signed, there has been no Egyptian-Israeli conflict, and there has been intermittent, though quiet, security cooperation between the two neighbors.

Washington is increasingly using MAT as a lever to advance a broader range of U.S. goals, beyond Israeli-Egyptian peace. Depending on the MENA country in question, U.S. officials hope that the MAT will persuade MENA states to: fight mutual threats, such as al Qaeda and associated groups; incentivize partners to purchase U.S. military equipment, rather than weapons systems and other equipment from U.S. competitors such as Russia and China; support the U.S. and its allies in efforts to contain Iran; help to ensure special access privileges for the U.S. military; and professionalize MENA militaries to respect civil-military boundaries and human rights norms. In other words, the number of expectations for MAT outcomes has grown over the past 10 years.<sup>43</sup> Since 2003, Jordan and Iraq are receiving more annual FMF. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings began, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon have all seen their FMF rates increase, reflecting the growing number of objectives and expectations of the FMF investment.<sup>44</sup> There has been a 38 percent increase in FMF to Jordan from 2005 to 2013, signaling a U.S. policy intent to directly invest in regime security and stability, given the importance of the Jordanian-U.S. alliance and Jordan's strategic location.<sup>45</sup> In some of these cases, it is easy to trace how the U.S. investment yields an outcome directly supportive of U.S. security interests. In other cases, it is more difficult.

Washington is also increasingly using MAT in order to reassure allies of enduring American security commitments. The DOD used new FMS in 2010-2012 to reassure the government of Israel of American security guarantees and to urge restraint against Iran.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 2013, as the United States began to pursue negotiations with Iran over the nuclear issue, it allocated additional FMS to reassure its Gulf allies and to prevent potential realignment of the Gulf states away from the U.S. It is still too soon to know if this investment in FMS as a means of strategic reassurance will lead to the

desired outcome, measurable only by evaluating the security policies of Israel and the Gulf states over the next five to 10 years.

The MAT to newly transitioned states (e.g., Yemen, Tunisia, Libya) is thus far insufficient to rebuild the militaries of these states, but it is a downpayment on prospective bilateral cooperation, intended to build capacity to fight al Qaeda and to reform militaries to fit the emerging democratic societies that they will defend, among a range of goals. Yet greater analysis of how MAT assistance best shapes outcomes, including comparisons of particular packages of hard equipment, trainings and assistance, would usefully inform how FMF packages are designed. Without understanding how the MAT investment is directly shaping the decisionmaking by the MENA militaries and the civilians with whom they serve, it is difficult to use MAT strategically to advance U.S. national security interests, including the promotion of governance, economic reform and human rights.

Second, there is no comprehensive, universally-applicable metric that allows U.S. foreign policymakers to assess objectively the changing quality and closeness of military to military (or civilian) relations between the U.S. and the recipient MENA states. While these relations between the U.S. and the MENA states are not intended to be an end goal in and of themselves, they are an objective of great importance to U.S. national security planners. Strong military to military relations can help to ensure that regional states ally with and support the United States on a range of security issues. In a moment of crisis, the U.S. military depends on the support of MENA states and their militaries, and officials believe that strong overall relationships (military and civilian) protect against these contingencies. The MAT activities involve U.S. military officials and civilians working daily with their MENA counterparts – on the military sales,

for instance, or through trainings and exercises. The actual work done together to identify items for purchase or loan and to help train and exercise together is meaningful relationship-building in its own right. How the MAT provided to MENA states serves the larger, strategic relationship is a judgment often vulnerable to subjective interpretation.

Egypt in particular stands out as a hard case. Defense professionals cite the U.S. MAT to Egypt as the reason that Egypt's military allows overflight rights to the U.S. military and grants the U.S. preferential access through the Suez Canal. However, there is growing evidence that despite spending over \$60 billion in security assistance since 1979, military to military ties between the U.S. and Egypt rest on shaky foundations: Junior and mid-level Egyptian army officers hold less positive views of the United States than their superiors do, suggesting that the FMF may not be strengthening institutional ties broadly and deeply.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, absent testable hypotheses regarding how MAT investments lead to strong military to military ties, or a more granular assessment of how strengthening military ties today can be an investment in future U.S. security needs, assessing the impact of U.S. FMF is susceptible to anecdotal and inferential conclusions. In February 2011, the U.S. military pointed to its 30-year investment in Egypt-American military to military ties – solidified through FMF, IMET, military exercises and other trainings – as a key reason that General Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and the Egyptian army responded to Defense Secretary Robert Gates' diplomacy and responsibly oversaw President Mubarak's smooth exit. Two years later, however, the same investment in U.S. military to military ties could not be leveraged successfully to convince General Abdel Fatah al-Sissi to refrain from removing the elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from office or, failing that, responsibly steer the chaotic

and violent post-Morsi era. The overemphasis on U.S. leverage in the former case, as well as the potential underemphasis on U.S. leverage in the latter, suggests the need for greater analysis. This assessment would enable policymakers to ensure the greatest return on the MAT investment, in part by building deep U.S.-MENA military to military relationships that are capable of enduring crises and shielding these relationships from the waves of anti-Americanism rife in the region.

A third question follows from the first two: How do the MENA states perceive the MAT packages? In other words, do they perceive MAT to be an entitlement, a favor (given the U.S. domestic industrial interests involved) or a symbol of the U.S.-MENA alliance? This question is important because, as the U.S. government has charted its response to the Arab transitions, it has experimented with withholding MAT elements as conditionality, to leverage better behavior by MENA militaries and governments. In 2011, U.S. policymakers decided to suspend some FMS to Bahrain in order to urge its leaders to fulfill the recommendations of the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry.<sup>48</sup> In Egypt too, after the 2013 coup, the U.S. withheld part of its FMF as a way to urge General al-Sissi toward the restoration of democratic institutions.<sup>49</sup> These conditionality experiments assume that the MENA states see the MAT as Washington does: a positive sign of the relationship, of course, but also fundamentally a transaction that is beneficial and desirable to both sides. Conditionality can only work if what is being withheld by the U.S. is deeply desired by the MENA governments in question. If MENA states see elements of MAT as entitlements or simply a symbol of U.S. security commitments alone, then withholding MAT may not work as a lever of U.S. influence, particularly to persuade MENA state decisionmaking on governance and human rights issues.

In short, more analysis could help to refine the strategic use of MAT as a lever to influence government decisionmaking in MENA.<sup>50</sup> Such an analysis will have to probe how the United States can withhold MAT items and assistance that is more important to the MENA country in question than it is to the United States and how to prevent MENA leaders, out of spite or desire for retribution, to withhold elements of their bilateral security cooperation from the United States in return. Second, it is possible that transitioning leaders of MENA states might seize upon U.S. conditionality efforts for their own domestic political purposes, by playing upon nationalist sentiment and blaming the United States. As a result, U.S. conditionality efforts, rather than pressuring MENA leaders to change positions, could end up strengthening these very same leaders, by presenting them with an opportunity to stand up to the United States in a way that plays to their domestic constituents.

Surprisingly, despite the significant resources spent on military assistance and training levers, there is very little data-backed research on these three questions.<sup>51</sup> Recent Government Accountability Office reports on FMF and IMET in the region have raised these questions and asked DOD and State to study these issues.<sup>52</sup> Given the abundance of historical data, and the sufficient elapsed time since the earliest MAT investments (allowing for longitudinal assessments), greater analysis on each of these questions is possible – and necessary.

### Conclusion

The four positive levers discussed here represent only a partial list of how U.S. policymakers from the DOD, State Department and other agencies exert influence in a noncoercive manner across the MENA region. Although this list is not exhaustive, it does represent the most expensive and time-consuming positive tools. U.S. officials will continue to use them every day, at all levels of seniority. As

a result, a new paradigm in which policymakers ask about the return on their investment is needed. Such an analytic approach would serve U.S. policymakers refining their overall strategy in the MENA region, both toward newly transitioned states and toward those states where the governments have endured the Arab uprisings.

It is therefore far too simplistic – and premature – to lament the decline of U.S. influence in the MENA region. Considering how, precisely, U.S. levers are yielding influence and how they are not may enable policymakers to integrate their diplomatic and programmatic tool kits more creatively and to synthesize the four positive levers discussed here with additional levers beyond the purview of this paper. Moreover, this is not simply an academic exercise. The United States spends over \$16 billion annually on all of the positive levers discussed above in order to advance its interests in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>53</sup> Those who want to ensure the endurance of these funds in a time of austerity should embrace a paradigm of accountability, which focuses on the links between investments and outcomes.

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