The future of Persian Gulf security
by Lawrence G. Potter

The future of security in the Persian Gulf is high on the list of the many foreign policy challenges faced by the incoming administration of Joseph R. Biden. The aim of presidents Barack H. Obama and Donald J. Trump to reduce the U.S. footprint there and "pivot toward Asia" has been stymied, due to the strategic importance of the Gulf and the continued high state of tension there. In recent years there has been a cascade of adverse events, including the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria since their "defeat" in 2017-18, U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (May 2018), the Iranian attack on Saudi oil facilities (September 2019), and the assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani (January 2020).

In contrast to previous U.S. presidential campaigns, foreign policy did not play a major role in the election, nor did either candidate lay out a comprehensive strategy for the Middle East. The most contentious topics were Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Trump and Biden taking very different views. This lack of interest seems to reflect public exhaustion after a long history of intervention that has been very costly in American lives and treasure (an estimated $6.4 trillion since 9/11) but has led to few lasting benefits for either the U.S. or regional states.

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The current disorder in the Persian Gulf derives partly from changes that arose after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. In the latter, massive anti-government and pro-democracy protests swept the Arab World, overturning governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. There were violent crackdowns in Bahrain and Oman and demonstrations in Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This thoroughly rattled Gulf monarchs, who responded by buying support, blaming Iran, and instituting a crackdown on human rights. Outside the Gulf, intractable civil wars continue in Syria (nine years), Libya (six years) and Yemen (5 years).

Most recently, the crash of oil prices that took place following the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020 has dealt a major economic blow to the entire region, as a supply glut and reduced demand converged. For example, the Saudi budget for 2020 was based on an oil price of $80 a barrel. In May 2019, the price of oil was $67, which by May 2020 had dropped to $32. (In April, U.S. oil dropped to zero for a short time as producers ran out of storage capacity.) By November, the price was in the $40 range.

The role of U.S. policy

The U.S. may want to step back, but it is still very much involved in the Persian Gulf. Since World War II its main goal in the region has been to safeguard access to the region’s oil and to prevent any other power (first the Soviet Union and later Iraq and Iran) from threatening this. The Gulf states also figure in a number of other American foreign policy concerns, including terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, radical Islam, democratization, human rights and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

After the British voluntarily withdrew from the Gulf in 1971, the U.S., tied down by war in Vietnam, was not ready to assume responsibility for Gulf security. It delegated this to Iran and Saudi Arabia, and these “Twin Pillars” kept the peace until the Iranian Revolution broke out in January 1978. In 1980 President Carter announced a new policy to guarantee security in the Gulf and exclude outside powers, namely the Soviet Union. This eventually led to a major U.S. naval intervention to protect oil tankers in 1987, and an expanding military buildup thereafter.

Formulating an effective policy to assure the security of Gulf oil exports has not been easy. Over the past four decades, the region has experienced a revolution (Iran, 1978–79) and three major wars (Iran-Iraq, 1980–88, Persian Gulf, 1990–91 and Iraq, 2003–11). Since the Iranian revolution U.S. primacy has partly depended on close cooperation with friendly Arab governments, especially the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), and Oman.

Up until the attacks of 9/11, Washington was satisfied with maintaining the status quo, even permitting Saddam Hussein to remain in power after Iraq was defeated in war. However, in a major change of approach, in 2003 President George W. Bush waged a preventive war against Iraq in a bid to overthrow Saddam and install democracy. It has not turned out that way.

Reevaluating U.S. interests

In light of the end of the Cold War and overt U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Middle East, and decreased American reliance on Gulf oil, many feel it is time to reevaluate U.S. interests. A distinguished U.S. diplomat with deep knowledge of the region, William J. Burns, has warned that American policy in the Middle East is at a crossroads: “we need a significant shift in the terms of our engagement in the region—lowering our expectations for transformation, ending our habit of indulging the worst instincts of our partners and engaging in cosmetic confrontation with state adversaries, finding a more focused and sustained approach to counterterrorism, and putting more emphasis on diplomacy backed by military leverage, instead of the other way around.”

The most critical U.S. interest in the Gulf has always been safeguarding oil exports. However, by 2018 only 15% of U.S. oil imports came from there, and thanks to shale oil the U.S. has become a net exporter. Currently more than 80% of Gulf oil goes to Asia. The main customers for Persian Gulf crude are China (19%), India (16%), Japan (15%) and South Korea (13%). The Gulf states themselves are now reorienting their foreign policy to “Look Eastward.”

Analysts wonder whether the U.S. should reduce its footprint there and let others, such as Russia, China or India, assume more responsibility for security. Trump himself has declared that the American decision to get involved in the Middle East “was the single biggest mistake in the history of our country.” On the other hand, “to say that the Middle East matters less to the United States does not mean that decreased U.S. involvement will necessarily be good for the region,” according to Mara Karlin of Johns Hopkins and Tamara Cofman Wittes of the Brookings Institution.

Gulf security historically

The security of the Persian Gulf has been a concern of outside powers for the past 500 years, and the situation today resembles that which has long prevailed: an imperial hegemon—now the United States—tries to maintain stability thanks to naval superiority and an alliance with key regional states. However, the U.S., like Britain before it, has never been able to exert complete control over these states nor prevent local rivalries.

A succession of European powers controlled the Gulf once the route around the Cape of Good Hope was discovered by Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias in 1488. Based on the island of...
Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf, the Portuguese exercised hegemony from 1505 until 1622, followed by a century of Dutch control. The British, relying on seapower, assumed control over the Gulf in the early 19th century, although they were challenged by Ottoman incursions in the 19th century. With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Britain remained the predominant outside power there until 1971.

During the Pax Britannica the British goal was to protect navigation and communication routes to India. They also wanted to safeguard overland routes to Europe, as well as prevent Russia from exercising undue influence on Persia. The British maintained a maritime peace in the Gulf after 1835, and took under their protection the Arabian shaikhs ruling there. In return for their fealty and British control over foreign relations, they expected a guarantee that they and their families would remain in power. Britain drew the modern state borders, starting with Iran in the late 19th century, and took the lead in exploiting the oil resources discovered in Iran (1908), Iraq (1927), Bahrain (1932), and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (1938).

**Gulf security today**

Just as the Gulf constituted a distinct region geographically and historically, many analysts believe we should regard the Gulf today as a “regional security complex” rather than focus on the foreign policy of individual countries. This is because most interactions in this region are with each other rather than with outsiders, according to Professor F. Gregory Gause, III, of Texas A & M University. Above all in the Gulf there is an intertwining of internal and external security challenges, as is illustrated by the ongoing conflict in Yemen, seen by some as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. “Spiraling tensions in the Persian Gulf have placed unprecedented strain on a regional security structure little changed since the 1980s,” according to Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Fellow for the Middle East at Rice University. He emphasizes that the concept of what constitutes security is itself changing, from “hard” military might protecting nations to the “soft” security issues—climate change, demographic increase, food and water security, environmental pollution—that are increasingly recognized as constituting the most pressing future threats to peoples’ lives.

The impact of globalization and media penetration of the region, the widespread availability of information online and the growing youth bulge, all presage a new kind of politics in which ruling elites are increasingly called to account by their citizens. The real threats to ruling dynasties come from within and are driven by policies.
The Persian Gulf is a 600-mile-long arm of the Indian Ocean which separates the Arabian peninsula from Iran. (Since the 1950s Arab states have referred to it as the Arabian Gulf, in an attempt to give it a new identity and belittle Iran.) The Gulf is bordered by Iran and seven Arab states: Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman. It is bounded by the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the north, which forms the frontier between Iran and Iraq, and the Strait of Hormuz in the south, which connects it to the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. The strait, which is 34 miles wide at its narrowest point, is the choke point of the Gulf: In 2018, about 21 million barrels of oil, a fifth of global petroleum consumption, were transported out of the Gulf every day on supertankers. The possibility of its closure by Iran has been a nightmare for Western defense planners since the Iranian revolution.

In mid-2020, the eight littoral states contained some 182.4 million people, representing many ethnic, religious, linguistic and political communities. In 1950, their combined population was estimated to be around 24 million people; it is projected to rise to 235.4 million by the year 2050. This population is unevenly distributed, with Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia together accounting for 158.9 million. All of the Gulf states must contend with young and rapidly rising populations. (In Iran, for example, a population of 35 million at the time of the revolution in 1978 has swollen to 84.2 million.)

Muslims (followers of the Islamic religion) are split into two major sects, Sunni and Shi'a. The two differ over who was legitimately entitled to lead the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. Sunnis predominate; they believe that the community should choose its own leader. Shi'as, who are a majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, believe leadership is vested in the family of the Prophet. Sunni Islam has historically been associated with bestowing legitimacy on the power of rulers; Shi'i Islam, with opposition, martyrdom and revolt. Following the success of the Iranian Revolution, radical Sunni groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS arose to create their own version of political Islam.

The majority of Iranians were converted to Shi'ism in the 16th and 17th centuries. Although southern Iraq and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala have always been the Shi'i heartland, Iraq only became majority Shi'a in the 19th century. A Shi'ite community existed in Bahrain and eastern Arabia (Al Haşā) from about the 10th century, but since the rise of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia in the mid-18th century, and particularly since the formation of the state of Saudi Arabia in 1932, Shi'ites in eastern Arabia have come under heavy pressure.

Since the revolution in Iran in 1978–79 and the rise of Shi'ites in Lebanon in the 1970s, Shiism has been regarded as a powerful political force that can mobilize the downtrodden (mostazafin in Persian) and pose a challenge to ruling regimes. By the late 20th century some Shi'i-majority countries that had Sunni governments—such as Iraq and Bahrain—witnessed the rise of resistance movements. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 Iraq had been led by Shiites. Most outsiders associate Shiism with its Iranian version, and have underestimated the countervailing force of nationalism, as demonstrated by Iraqis during their war with Iran in the 1980s. Another major cleavage pits Arab against Persian. Arabic, a Semitic language, is spoken in Iraq and the states of the peninsula. Iran has an Aryan heritage, and its main language, Persian (Farsi), is an Indo-European tongue. Persians regard their cultural legacy as richer than that of the Arabs, although their religion, Islam, was founded by an Arab, the Prophet Muhammad.

Destabilizing factors

Today the Gulf presents "an intractable security dilemma," according to Mehran Kamrava of Georgetown University, in which policymaking is driven by fear and the Gulf is less secure than ever before. This is a result of the highly divergent perspectives on the sources of tensions, depending on whether you are sitting in Washington, Tehran, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha or elsewhere," says Robert Malley, president of the International Crisis Group.

What factors account for this insecurity? One is the relative size of states, in which Iran (with a population estimated at 84.2 million in mid-2020) finds it hard to take seriously a smaller state like the UAE (9.8 million), while Saudi Arabia (35 million) is dismissive toward tiny Qatar (2.8 million).

The GCC, if unified, could act as a powerful bloc to oppose Iran and Iraq. However, the inability of its members which promote social division and economic inequality. The "ruling bargain" by which Gulf rulers provide their citizens jobs, housing, education, and health care in return for political acquiescence is now breaking down. As became evident at the time of the Arab Spring, people in the Middle East, including the Gulf, are finding their voice and losing their fear of confronting rulers who exercise autocratic control.

In the wake of the failed Arab Spring revolts, rulers became increasingly authoritarian and less tolerant of any criticism, which stoked internal unrest in Shi'a-majority areas of Bahrain and Eastern Saudi Arabia. As governments now confront the Covid-19 crisis and increase their control over society, they have been relying upon a new nationalist rhetoric and collective responsibility which they have been nurturing in recent years," according to Dr. Kristin Diwan of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. Amnesty International charged last October that GCC states, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have used the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to continue pre-existing patterns of suppressing the right to freedom of expression.
to work together because of mutual suspicion has almost made the GCC irrelevant. “Since the beginning, the [Qatar] crisis has served to refute the existence of a collective security regime among the GCC states. They share neither similar values nor common interests. Their conflict also conceals different leadership visions about the future of the region,” according to Marwan Kabalan of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Since security has long been provided by outsiders, the GCC states never developed strong armies in which citizens were required to participate. Many, especially the richest ones—Qatar, the U.A.E. and Kuwait—have a tradition of subcontracting their security needs, usually to Sunnis from the Arab World and South Asia. Those fighting in the Yemen War on the Saudi side are primarily mercenaries from Sudan, Somalia, and other places. The UAE has also hired thousands of mercenaries and private military contractors to fight in Yemen and Libya.

Another factor is the transnational nature of regional states. Most harbor within them ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities that rulers fear may be more loyal to their brethren across borders than to the state itself. In the Gulf most states have an Arab, Sunni, citizen majority (except in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain), but also accommodate Shi’a and other minorities that are viewed with suspicion.

Ever since the Iran-Iraq War, with the unrestrained mutual disparagement of Sunni and Shi’a and Arab and Persian, the discourse in the region has served to inflame sectarian tensions. Especially since 2003, the advent of Shi’i leadership in Iraq has alarmed Sunni monarchies, fueling sectarianism and stoking fears of a malevolent “Shi’a crescent.” While once regarded as an Islamic sect, today the Shi’a are seen as a security threat.

Disputes over Islam can also be divisive. The competing versions of Islam promoted by Turkey and Saudi Arabia amount to a struggle for the allegiance of all Muslims. Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar both follow the Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam, the version adhered to in Saudi is much more stringent. Saudi leaders “don’t like bottom-up movements that threaten their control, like the Muslim Brotherhood [favored by Turkey and Qatar] or salafi jihadism, not to mention revolutionary Shiiism,” according to Prof. Gause. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have now declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

Another issue is contested borders. Many boundary disputes in the Gulf have been settled in recent decades, including one between Qatar and Bahrain that was resolved by the World Court in 2001. However, other disputes persist, such as that over the Shatt al-Arab River which forms part of the boundary between Iran and Iraq. One of the most durable disputes has been over ownership of three tiny islands, Abu Musa and the two Tunbs, claimed by Iran and the UAE. The islands issue has poisoned amity in the Gulf for years. Other boundary disputes pit Kuwait against Iraq, Saudi Arabia against the UAE and the UAE against Oman.

There is also the specter of terrorism, employed by radical groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, which have tried to destabilize Saudi Arabia and Iraq and export their ideology to conflict zones in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. In March 2019 the U.S. announced the final destruction of the ISIS “caliphate” and that October killed its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, the UN declared in August 2020 that an estimated 10,000 Islamic State fighters were currently active in Iraq and Syria. Last August, the second-highest leader of Al Qaeda was assassinated in Tehran “by Israeli operatives at the behest of the U.S.,” according to the New York Times. Iran and Saudi Arabia each accuse the other of being the main sponsor of terrorism in the region.

The nature of rule in the Gulf monarchies, which are run by family dynasties rather than individual kings such as in Jordan and Morocco, can also be a complicating factor. Power is exercised autocratically and policy is made by a small circle of royals who are not accountable to citizens.

The confluence of destabilizing factors and fear of their neighbors has led to a pervasive sense of insecurity. Gulf rulers prioritize regime security over the security of the state. They have favored a realist approach to foreign policy that is focused on hard power (weapons) and balance of power considerations. However, it is clear that arms do not provide security: extensive Saudi purchases of top of the line military equipment could not protect its oil installations at the time of the Iranian attacks.
The Gulf today: regional dynamics

Today in the Persian Gulf, as in other parts of the Middle East, political concerns have become overshadowed by two major interconnected crises: the Covid-19 pandemic, and the crash of oil prices. The sudden arrival of the coronavirus, which was first recorded in the region in Iran on January 22, 2020, is ravaging the Gulf and putting unprecedented pressure on health systems. By last fall Iran was the worst-hit country in the Middle East. The GCC states imposed strict restrictions, and many migrant workers returned home. Saudi Arabia cancelled the annual Hajj to Mecca and announced a cease-fire (not a peace agreement) in the war in Yemen. Emirates Airlines, the flagship carrier of the UAE, cancelled all flights between March 25 and July 15. Today, many websites have appeared in Dubai giving advice on how to close down your company.

At the same time the price of oil has dropped to below break-even cost, which is leading to huge deficits in Gulf states’ budgets. Only Qatar can break even at the current price of around $40 a barrel. Aside from the drop in current demand, the long-term outlook for oil revenues is not good as the world transitions away from its dependency on petroleum. British Petroleum, the world’s sixth largest oil and gas company, made a controversial statement last September that the demand for oil may be close to its peak and will fall for the next 30 years as the shift away from fossil fuels speeds up. Since the Gulf states are the lowest-cost producers, they will be less affected than others, but still need to plan for lower revenues. States outside the Gulf will be hurt by a reduction in bilateral trade, fewer job opportunities and reduced remittances.

Some regional issues that bear watching and will be discussed below include domestic developments in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the ongoing blockade of Qatar, Turkey-UAE rivalry and the new normalization agreements with Israel. Also of interest is the potential role of China, Russia and Iran as security providers in case the U.S. steps back.

Iran in crisis
The multiplying calamities now afflicting Iran have been exacerbated by stringent U.S. economic sanctions that seek to halt most imports and ban international transactions. These have drastically reduced oil exports and therefore government income. In April 2018 the Iranian currency, the rial, was valued at 45,000 to the dollar; by November 2020 it had collapsed to 285,000 to the dollar. In April 2018 Iran was exporting 2.5 million barrels of oil a day (bpd). In November 2020, Iran claimed the amount exported had been 600,000 to 700,000 bpd since the previous March, but this does not include an unknown amount smuggled out. With fluctuating exchange rates, rampant corruption and lack of protection under the law, many foreign companies are not about to invest there regardless of sanctions. Iranian banks are cut off from the world financial system and suffer from mismanagement, capital shortfall, and a lack of transparency.

The unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, after three years, has dashed hopes of a better future for Iranians and reinforced the role of hardliners running the state. “There is an undeniable sense of hopelessness in Iranian society, affecting everything from record high rates of those who want to emigrate to record low numbers of new marriages,” according to Alan Vatanka of the Middle East Institute. The multiplying internal problems have led to widespread anti-government protests—the most recent cycle lasted from November 2019 until the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, is 81 and ailing and his succession may come in the near future. The original “reign of the ayatollahs” has now morphed into rule by the security services, above all the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who are expected to fight hard to preserve their power. The Guard has increased its role in foreign policy and has been in the forefront of exerting Iran’s influence abroad, for example through Shi’i militias it has sponsored in Iraq. The IRGC seeks to preserve Iran’s revolutionary legacy and has strong economic interests in a state that has rewarded them well. They will make it very difficult to select a moderate successor to President Hassan Rouhani in the next election, scheduled for June 18, 2021. Although many Iranians might prefer a different form of government, there is no viable
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opposition leader or movement inside the country.

In light of the rhetoric emanating from its adversaries, Iran feels vulnerable. Mohammad bin Salman, then the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince, ominously warned in May 2017 that any future battle would be fought inside Iran, not the Gulf states. However, the Iranian attack against Saudi oil facilities was a stark reminder that Iranian missiles could easily lead to the ruin of the Gulf Arabs should they be aimed at desalination facilities or architectural icons like Burj al-Khalifa, the world’s tallest building, in Dubai.

Saudi Arabia

The brash crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman (MbS), who will likely succeed his father to the throne, has shaken up domestic affairs in the kingdom. He has also pursued an aggressive and reckless foreign policy, inspired by the regional turmoil and a fear that Riyadh can no longer rely on the U.S. to protect it. Since he took control in 2015 MbS has abandoned the traditional practice of making political decisions by consensus among a small family elite, with input from the Sunni ulama. MbS has now consolidated all power and authority in himself as he tries to remake Saudi society. He reportedly is popular with the younger generation, and has imposed striking reforms, such as allowing women to drive, restraining the religious police and allowing western-style entertainment. In 2016 the crown prince introduced “Saudi Vision 2030,” a major set of reforms that aim to reduce government subsidies, cut dependency on oil and empower the private sector. Due to the severe revenue shortfall many goals will have to be scaled back or deferred.

The future course of Iran-Saudi relations is critical for the region. At his UN speech last September 24, King Salman described Iran as a force for chaos. Most worrying is the vow of MbS in March 2018 that his country would obtain a nuclear weapon if Iran does. The U.A.E. opened its first nuclear power plant in August 2020, and Saudi Arabia is making plans to do the same, but has made clear it will not agree to the safeguards the U.S. demanded of Abu Dhabi. However, Saudi has cooperated with Iran in the past over oil prices, and may of necessity be pushed to reach a modus vivendi.

Game of thrones

The dispute that broke out in June 2017 between Qatar and a quartet of adversaries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt—has shuffled regional alliances, benefited Iran, and caused a serious policy dilemma for the U.S. Although ostensibly about Qatari perfidy, it is a continuation of intermittent Saudi attempts over a long period of time to expand their power throughout the Arabian peninsula.

Statements attributed to the amir of Qatar on May 23, 2017 allegedly expressed support for Iran, Israel, Hamas (a Sunni Palestinian organization based in Gaza) and Hezbollah (a Shi’i militant group based in Lebanon). The Qatari government denied such remarks had been made, and claimed that hackers were spreading false rumors. Shortly thereafter Saudi, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors from Doha and expelled Qatari diplomats, closed their airspace to Qatar Airways, the national carrier, and sealed the land border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, denying vital food imports to Qatar.

Qatar’s opponents subsequently submitted an ultimatum with 13 demands which were so extreme that they clearly could not be considered the basis for a settlement, including that Qatar downgrade relations with Iran, close the Al Jazeera media network and sever relations with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The quarrel forms part of the fallout of the Arab Spring, in which each state took a different approach toward political Islam and the role of elections. It was not about sectarian issues: for
example, Shi'i Iran came to the rescue of Sunni Qatar while Saudi Arabia has taken steps to reconcile with Shi'i leaders in Iraq.

This attempt to pressure Qatar has now backfired and put Saudi and the UAE on the back foot. Doha acquired new trading partners, notably Turkey and Iran, and set up alternate air routes. Despite diplomatic efforts to resolve it, the dispute continues to be stalemated. Most concerning, it has led to the virtual collapse of the GCC, supposedly a shield against external threats and a model for regional cooperation.

**Rivalry between the U.A.E. and Turkey**

The current power struggle between Turkey and the UAE and their respective leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Shaikh Mohammad bin Zayed, is “defining the politics of the Middle East at the moment,” notes Emile Habiby of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. They were on opposite sides during the Arab Spring, with Qatar and Turkey backing the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and the UAE and Saudi Arabia working to replace it. The two powerful leaders promote different versions of Islam and in a bid to increase their power have backed different sides in regional disputes. The UAE regards the Turkey-Qatar alliance as harmful to it, while each has intervened on a different side in Libya’s civil war. The UAE is suspicious that Erdogan wants to be regarded as the leader of the Sunni world and revive Ottoman pretentions to control the Gulf.

**Israel and the Gulf**

Support by Gulf Arabs for the Palestinians has always been strong, at least rhetorically, which ruled out official relations with Israel. The leadership in Israel and the Gulf monarchies, however, have been on the same side on some issues. They both backed President Mubarak of Egypt against the anti-government protests in 2011, for example. The two sides have had discreet links for some time. Israel briefly opened trade offices, now closed, in Doha and Muscat, and their intelligence agencies cooperate against Iran and Islamic terrorism. Because of common hostility to the government in Iran, it has long been suggested that they could form an opposition front.

In surprise announcements in August and September 2020, the UAE and Bahrain normalized relations with Israel, joining Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). Other Arab states may follow suit. This breaches the red line set in the Arab Peace Initiative proposed by Saudi Crown Prince, later King Abdullah in 2002 and endorsed by the Arab League, which specifies that an Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories and formation of a Palestinian state must precede recognition of Israel.

Under the Israel–UAE deal, Israel agreed to “suspend” annexation of territory it occupies on the West Bank. The accord was expected to lead to cooperation in investment, tourism, aviation, technology, agriculture and energy, and permit the opening of embassies and airline flights. (The first direct El Al flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi was allowed to cross Saudi airspace and arrived on August 31.) Both Israel and the Emirates expect major arms packages (perhaps including F-35 fighter jets) to be approved by the U.S. as a sweetener. The new weapons deal immediately raised concerns in the Senate that it would reduce Israel’s ability to maintain military superiority in the Middle East.

The agreements were a valuable endorsement of Israel as a legitimate part of the region. A major prize would be Saudi recognition, but King Salman indicated by his silence on the topic at the UN last September that this would not be forthcoming. His son, the crown prince, is believed to be ready to do so if he accedes the throne.

**The role of outside actors**

Should the U.S. reduce its footprint, the countries with the most stake in Gulf oil are all in Asia, but can they provide security? The GCC economic policy is to “Look East,” but that does not mean they want others to replace U.S. protection. Several candidates that have been widely discussed as possibly taking on a larger role in the Gulf are China, India and Russia. They have all been accused of being “free riders” on the security provided by the U.S.

**China**

China’s relations with Iran and the Gulf Arabs have improved due to their need for each other. China is highly de-
dependent on oil from Iran, which needs the revenue and Chinese help to evade U.S. sanctions. Iran and China have discussed a long-term economic cooperation and security agreement, not yet made public, which reportedly would include major investment in the Iranian economy and perhaps give the Chinese access to the Gulf, in return for an assured flow of discounted Iranian oil for many years.

The Gulf region also plays a role in China’s signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This includes the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan (near the Strait of Hormuz) and Duqm in Oman, as well as investment in Jebel Ali port in Dubai, where in 2018 more than 230 Chinese companies were headquartered. As part of the BRI China has also opened a military facility in Djibouti.

China does not want to have to choose between Iran and the Gulf monarchies. “The Chinese want to do business, they don’t want to be fighting wars,” according to Ayesha Siddiqa of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies. So far China has focused on development aid, not military aid, and does not criticize domestic policies of the Gulf states. Overall an increased Chinese military commitment to protect the Gulf seems unlikely. For China, ties with the U.S. trump those with Iran.

Some caution that Chinese influence in the Gulf may be overestimated. According to Karen Young of the American Enterprise Institute, the Chinese demand for oil will wane over the next 20 years due to a declining birthrate, which will cause a fiscal crisis for Gulf exporters: “What comes after China’s Gulf fling is something American policymakers should be thinking about more seriously.”

India

India has maintained close ties with the Gulf for millennia, and 8.5 million Indians were working there in 2018, most in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. That year India received $79 billion in remittances. Despite their numbers, these migrant workers avoid involvement in local politics and are not regarded as a political threat in Gulf states. However, ruling dynasties have not been willing to grant them citizenship and their status is not secure.

Now, millions are being sent home due to Covid-19, many without the salary they are due.

India does not appear to want a major security role in the Gulf. It has good relations with Iran and is helping to develop its port at Chabahar, a competitor to the Chinese-supported port of Gwadar nearby in Pakistan. Gulf rulers also have to carefully balance relations with India and Pakistan, which is an Islamic state and contributes soldiers to Gulf military forces.

Russia

Russia is believed to have long desired a warm-water port on the Persian Gulf. It was warned by Britain in 1903 and the U.S. in 1979 to stay out. However, under President Vladimir Putin Russia has acted opportunistically in the region and sought to revive the influence it had there during the Cold War. Since 2015 Russia has inserted itself in the civil war in Syria and become the strongest supporter, along with Iran, of the Bashar al-Assad government. In Libya, Russia, along with the U.A.E. and Egypt, is backing the rebel movement of warlord Khalifa Haftar. So far Russia has not shown much interest in providing security in the Gulf.

Russia and the Gulf Arabs have a common interest in maintaining a high price for oil, although they have differed on how to do so. In September 2016 Russia and Saudi Arabia decided to cooperate to manage oil pricing, with Saudi making large cuts in production. However in March 2020, in the face of falling demand, a Saudi-Russian price war broke out after Russia refused to cut production to maintain prices. Russia subsequently agreed to cuts.

What does all this mean for the U.S.? According to Ambassador Burns, “we ought to be mindful of other peoples’ mistakes. China’s risk aversion has only been reinforced by watching us lurch through the regional minefield.”

The U.S. role in the Gulf: retrospect and prospect

In the wake of the Gulf War of 1990–91 the U.S. emerged as the dominant power in the region. In a throwback to the era of British imperialism, the strongest U.S. bond has been formed with the mini-states of the GCC, where Washington has established a permanent military infrastructure. The U.S. Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, and the U.S. has a major army base at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait and key airbase at Al-Udayd in Qatar. Military equipment is prepositioned throughout the region, including Kuwait, Oman and the UAE.

In place of the balance of power strategy the U.S. followed during the Iran-Iraq War, the Clinton administration (1993–2001) introduced a new policy in May 1993, dubbed “Dual Containment,” which sought to pressure both Iran and Iraq and exclude them from regional affairs. The U.S. maintained that it accepted the Iranian revolution and harbored no hostility to Islam per se. But it accused Iran of trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction, supporting terrorism and assassinating Iranian dissidents abroad.

Missed opportunities

The U.S. responded positively, if cautiously, to the election of President Khatami in Iran in 1997. In an important policy statement on June 17, 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright urged Iran to join the U.S. in drawing up “a road map leading to normal relations.” In March 2000, she went as far as any American official has gone in
making a qualified apology for the U.S. role in overthrowing the Mossadegh government during the oil nationalization crisis in 1953.

Although Iran was an irritant, both Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush (2001–09) regarded Iraq as the real regional menace. Ten years after the allied defeat of Iraq defused the immediate threat to Kuwait, the continued presence of Saddam Hussein was impoverishing and demoralizing Iraqi society and compromising the region’s long-term security. The U.S. tried to contain Baghdad through four rounds of UN sanctions, by regular inspections and monitoring, and by enforcing no-fly zones in the north and south.

Administration policy on Iraq and Iran was influenced above all by the attacks of September 11, 2001, which highlighted the dangers of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Of the 19 Al Qaeda militants who carried out the attacks, 15 were from Saudi Arabia and 2 from the U.A.E. Whereas U.S. policy for a decade after the Gulf War was to maintain the status quo, President George W. Bush opted for major change by waging a preventive war to oust Saddam.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration began laying the groundwork for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. worked with Iran to evict the Taliban and install the government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan in December 2001. Any goodwill and cooperation, however, was cut short by President Bush’s designation of Iran as part of an “axis of evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union address.

**Obama administration**

When President Obama took office in January 2009 there was widespread opposition to the wars Bush had started, and a perceived U.S. bias against Muslims. Obama quickly moved to repair the American image abroad. In a major address in Cairo, Egypt, on June 4, 2009, he said he came to seek “a new beginning between the U.S. and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition.” He said, “America is not—and never will be—at war with Islam. We will, however, relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security....” He continued to hold out hope of discussing issues with Iran “without preconditions and on the basis of mutual respect.”

By the fall of 2009, however, things had changed, following revelations of a secret uranium enrichment plant under construction at Fordo, near Qom, Iran. In the spring of 2010 the UN imposed a fourth round of sanctions. In the most spectacular and successful project, the U.S. secretly worked with Israel to develop the Stuxnet computer worm, which infected and disabled computers in Iranian nuclear plants between June 2009 and May 2010. By seriously harming these computers, the U.S. achieved by cyberwarfare what would have been the aim of a military strike.

**Arab Spring: the U.S. response**

Calibrating the U.S. response to the events of the Arab Spring was one of the greatest foreign policy challenges for the Obama administration. Repeatedly, the U.S. was forced to take sides between a popular uprising demanding democracy, and the autocratic rulers it had long worked with who ensured security and “stability.” In the case of Egypt, President Mubarak had been a close U.S. ally for 30 years and had kept the peace with Israel. After equivocating at first, eventually the U.S. voiced support for the demonstrators and accepted that Mubarak had to go.

In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the U.S. was notably silent and supportive of the ruling family. The Al Saud were greatly angered at the forced departure of Mubarak, and feared that the U.S. would abandon them next. While employing soaring rhetoric, Obama did not outline a coherent policy for the region. He was strongly criticized for ignoring a “red line” he had drawn in August 2012 to forestall Syrian chemical weapons use in the civil war. This was followed by a chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, Syria, on August 21, 2013. Although Congress passed a bill authorizing military intervention, this was not necessary as the Syrian government agreed to a U.S.-Russian proposal to turn over its chemical weapons stockpile for destruction.

In Obama’s second term the administration, led by Secretary of State John F. Kerry, focused on Iran and achieved its signal foreign policy achievement. With its partners, in July 2015 the U.S. negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, which achieved the paramount goal of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear
weapon in return for an easing of sanctions and normalization of relations. The agreement was widely praised but also had vocal critics—as a presidential candidate Trump disparaged it as “the worst deal ever.”

When Obama met with King Salman in Riyadh in April 2016, the atmosphere was tense. When later asked if he regarded the Saudis as friends, he replied, “it’s complicated.” Obama pressed the king to “share” the neighborhood with Iran—an appeal he did not appreciate. He criticized the kingdom’s harsh human rights record, and expressed dissatisfaction with the war in Yemen. Obama also reiterated his view that Saudi Arabia and the GCC states in the future needed to rely less on the U.S. for their security.

**U.S. policy in the age of Trump**

By the time Donald Trump took office, disillusionment with the U.S. stoked by the invasion of Iraq, U.S. equivocation during the Arab Spring, and the expansion of Iranian influence, was widespread in the Middle East. Trump came to foreign policy with a weak understanding of the region. Personal diplomacy was a hallmark of his approach, with many U.S. experts on the region sidelined. “Where his predecessor hoped to win hearts and minds, Mr. Trump...has embraced the hawks of the region, in Israel and the Persian Gulf, as his chief guides and allies,” according to international correspondent David D. Kirkpatrick.

Trump made his first trip abroad to Saudi Arabia in May 2017 and formed a close bond with the Saudi royals. However, his polices were transactional and improvised, and opposed by most European allies. In interviews with Bob Woodward, legendary Washington Post journalist, Trump gloated that he saved the Saudi crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, after widespread evidence that he had ordered the assassination of a dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in Istanbul on October 2, 2018. The administration did not retaliate for a major attack Iran carried out on Saudi Arabian oil tanks and pipelines on September 14, 2019, which shocked the Gulf monarchs. It exposed their vulnerability and called into question the U.S. security guarantee that the Saudis had long relied on. The president maintained, however, “That was an attack on Saudi Arabia, that wasn’t an attack on us.”

The Trump administration maintained it sought to negotiate a “better deal” with Iran, but failed to do so. It reimposed UN sanctions last September 19 under “snapback” provisions of the nuclear deal. The other parties to the deal—Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—maintained this was illegal since the U.S. had already withdrawn from the accord. Following the election loss, in the remainder of its term the administration sought to impose “a flood of sanctions” not related to the nuclear deal, such as on its ballistic missile program, assistance to terror organizations and human rights abuses. Additional sanctions were placed on Iranian banks which seek to sever Iranian ties to the outside world, and were referred to by Barbara Slavin of the Atlantic Council as “sadism masquerading as foreign policy.”

“The harder the administration has pushed to kill off the deal, the more it has found itself isolated and Iran obdurrate,” according to Vali Nasr, a professor at Johns Hopkins. Nasr maintains that the lesson the Iranians have learned is that they must increase leverage by expanding their nuclear program before resuming negotiations. In June 2020, international nuclear inspectors accused Iran of refusing to allow inspections and sanitizing a suspected nuclear site, as the time for a nuclear “breakout” has now dropped to less than a year.

The U.S. and Iran have repeatedly arrived at the brink of conflict, often due to naval clashes in the Gulf. So far, each time they have stepped back. In the run-up to the U.S. presidential election, other than cyber warfare Iran refrained from any major actions. Iran has yet to retaliate for the U.S. assassination of military hero Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, or the bombing of its nuclear facility in Natanz (presumably by Israel) on July 2, 2020.

As soon as he assumed office, President Trump, noted for his “bromance” with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, announced he would focus on the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. Progress however, has stalled. Designating Jerusalem the capital of Israel, recognizing the Golan Heights as part of Israel, cutting funds for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides aid to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and shuttering the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington, belied a tilt toward Israel that had been avoided by previous administrations. The peace plan (“deal of the century”) developed by Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law, whose economic part was announced in June 2019 and political part in January 2020, was regarded as paving the way to annexation of Palestinian territory. It was reached without Palestinian approval, and by the end of Trump’s term it was evident that the U.S. had lost all credibility as an interlocutor.

Trump did score points by brokering normalization agreements (not peace treaties) between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (August 13, 2020) and Israel and Bahrain (September 15, 2020). Dubbed the “Abraham Accords,” a new anti-Iranian axis was confirmed and President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu scored pre-election wins. In October, Sudan and Israel opened economic ties, although not full diplomatic relations. The Palestinians, on the other hand, felt abandoned by other Arabs. The head of the Palestinian mission to the United Kingdom, Husam Zomlot, told the *New York Times* that “this agreement is very damaging to the cause of peace because it takes away one of the key incentives for Israel to end its occupation-normalization with the Arab World.”

Like Obama, Trump wanted to shift the American focus to Pacific Asia and avoid being hopelessly bogged down in the Middle East. With an eye on
the 2020 election, he announced troop withdrawals that would only leave 2,500 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and 2,500 in Iraq by the end of the year, which many in the military found alarming. However, even with these cuts there are still 45,000 to 65,000 U.S. troops deployed in the area between Jordan and Oman.

There is much uneasiness about U.S. policy within its own State Department and “American policy is now in free fall,” according to Daniel Brumberg, Senior Fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, D.C. By the end of Trump’s term, it was clear that the expectations of both the U.S. and the Gulf Arabs have been exaggerated and unrealistic. The priorities of the Gulf states lie in regime security and in persuading the U.S. to take the lead in opposing Iran. Trump, on the other hand, has relied on the Gulf states to keep oil prices low, confront Iran and pressure the Palestinians into making peace with Israel. The U.S. has urged Saudi and the UAE to resolve their quarrel with Qatar to no avail. Like Obama, Trump has also accused the Gulf monarchies of being “free riders” that depend upon the U.S. for their security and have to “pay their way” in return for U.S. defense.

Prospects for a Biden administration

President Biden will assume office with extensive foreign policy experience and familiarity with many world leaders. According to the New York Times, “none of his inner circle” are strident ideologues. Collectively they represent a relatively centrist, establishment worldview.” The most pressing issue is reframing policy toward Iran. Biden has indicated that he favors restoring the nuclear deal and would remove sanctions if Iran returns to compliance with the JCPOA. Tony Blinken, one of his top foreign policy advisers, has said that if this happens the U.S. would seek to negotiate a more comprehensive deal. Any renegotiation will not be easy, as it may take months for the administration to formulate a new policy and probably nothing can be done before a new Iranian president is elected next summer.

Biden has been critical of Saudi Arabia, and has promised to “make sure America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil.” During the Trump years Congress was repeatedly thwarted in trying to reduce weapons sales to Saudi. It passed a bipartisan resolution to end U.S. involvement in the Yemen War in April 2019, which Trump vetoed. U.S. officials are now concerned about being indicted for war crimes by selling weapons which caused civilian deaths—by late September 2020 an estimated 127,000 people had died in the war.

The GCC states are apprehensive about a Biden presidency and are afraid that once again the U.S. will devote efforts to reintegrate Iran back into the world community. In addition to “appeasing Iran,” the U.S. may seek to restrict arms sales, force an end to the war in Yemen, and raise human rights concerns, according to Professor Bernard Haykel of Princeton University. A Biden administration, he concludes, “will mean that America will become a less reliable ally for GCC countries... this could spell greater instability for the region.”

Policy options

The challenges to U.S. foreign policy in the Gulf would be substantial regardless of who won the presidency. What policy issues will be on the table for the new administration?

Stay or go in the Gulf? Although a U.S. withdrawal and retrenchment have been widely discussed, this would not be easy to achieve. The Gulf monarchies want the U.S. there and no other power can replace it. Ambassador Burns admits that the Middle East matters less to the U.S. now than it did 30 years ago, but he maintains that core U.S. interests still remain—access to oil, freedom of navigation, standing by allies such as Israel and some Arab states, and preventing terrorism. He suggests that we “rightsize our ambitions and realign our tools.” This means assuring external protection for the Gulf Arabs, but not supporting their meddling in places like Yemen, Libya, and Sudan.

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a Washington think tank, in July 2020 assessed that “a military drawdown from the Middle East does not amount to an abandonment of the region or an end to American engagement. On the contrary, the U.S. should increase its diplomatic presence and prioritize its role in reducing and/or resolving conflicts as a diplomatic peacemaker.”

The future of U.S. bases. President Trump strove to end the “forever wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan, but this did not lead to a full pullout of U.S. troops. Doing so in the Gulf would reduce U.S. visibility, distancing the monarchs from close association with the Americans and their policies while pleasing Iran. Acts like closing the naval base in Bahrain would allow the U.S. to criticize human rights abuses there. Should the U.S. maintain an adequate number of troops in the region to deter terrorist activity, protect freedom of navigation and protect friendly rulers from Iran? Should bases in the Gulf be an exception to a pullout in other parts of the Middle East? Or would it be better to revert to the kind of “over the horizon” policy the U.S. employed before 1990, stationing troops outside the Gulf in the Indian Ocean area?

Renew the Iran deal? As vice-president, Biden was involved in negotiating the JCPOA, and as president he favors reactivating it. This is a policy that many foreign policy professionals, and our European allies, would agree with. However, the “obligations” Iran would have to satisfy were not specified by Biden and would be subject to dispute. A major objection raised by critics was that the agreement did not cover other issues of concern to the U.S., such as ballistic missile development, support for terrorism, human rights abuses, anti-Israeli posturing, etc. Supporters of the deal such as Ambassador Wendy Sherman, who led the team negotiating it, acknowledge that it was not per-
A regional security organization? Should the U.S. promote the formation of a regional security organization to include all littoral states, notably Iran and Iraq? Perhaps if the Gulf monarchs were responsible for their own security, they would be more accommodating to neighbors who will not go away. This also might facilitate the confidence-building measures that have been sorely missing in the Gulf for decades.

Following the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War, Secretary of State James A. Baker said in February 1991 that Iran could play a role in future security arrangements in the region. But this did not happen, and no subsequent administration has been willing to recognize an Iranian role in the Gulf. This idea, nevertheless, has persisted.

In July 2019 Russia proposed holding an international conference on security and cooperation, to be followed by the establishment of a regional security organization that would include Iran and exclude the U.S. This guaranteed its rejection by the Gulf Arabs, who regard the U.S. presence as critical to their protection. China has welcomed but not specifically backed the proposal.

In an address to the UN Security Council last October 20, Robert Malley, president of the International Crisis Group, endorsed the idea of an inclusive regional security dialogue. He warned that tensions in the Gulf could inadvertently trigger a conflict nobody wants, which could result from “miscalculation, misinterpretation or lack of timely communication” as states engage in dangerous brinkmanship.

Iranian President Rouhani floated a “Hormuz Peace Endeavor” at the UN in September 2019, which calls for the withdrawal of U.S. forces and implicitly endorses Iran as the region’s hegemon. So far such a proposal has not gotten traction as Gulf Arabs fear it would be dominated by Iran. As long as the current government is in power in Tehran, there is no likelihood it could be accepted by the other side.

Perhaps a formula can be found to satisfy all littoral states. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said last October that he had been trying to get the Gulf states to engage in dialogue, recalling how well the Helsinki Process had worked in Europe to reconcile states after the Cold War. Guterres received strong support from all Security Council members except the U.S.

The Middle East will not be the same after the Covid-19 crisis, the crash of oil prices, and American diplomacy under the Trump administration. The sense that the U.S. will no longer protect them may have already pushed the Gulf Arabs into a less combative mode, with the Saudis and Emiratis recalibrating their actions toward Iran since the missile attack.

The future stability of the Gulf monarchies is at stake, and there are clear warning signs that the social contract that has long governed citizen-state relations must be revised. Eventually a post-oil era will arrive in the Gulf (it is already there in Bahrain, Yemen, and Oman), and the leadership must be ready for it. It is unfortunate that the Gulf states continue to delay in trying to mitigate the “soft” security issues that are most likely to cause disruption in the future.

It appears that by default the U.S. will continue to be involved in the Gulf in a major way, as no other power is ready or able to protect the region, or would be accepted by local states to do so. The U.S. presence will likely be reduced and perhaps revert to an “over the horizon” status. Washington still has interests to protect, which do not necessarily coincide with those of Iran, Iraq, the Gulf monarchies or Israel. Many would disagree with Martin Indyk, veteran diplomat and former U.S. ambassador to Israel, who said the Middle East is simply not worth it anymore, and the U.S. has few vital interests there.

The American people, as reflected by sentiment in Congress, are now experiencing fatigue from trying to do too much in the Gulf for too long, at huge cost and without positive results. What is needed is a reevaluation of U.S. policies, no matter how long they have been in place, in consultation with our allies. The Biden administration has a major job ahead in restoring mutual trust, and formulating policies appropriate for a new era that the American public can support.
discussion questions

1. What interests does the U.S. have in the Persian Gulf? How can they best be realized?

2. If the U.S. reduces its footprint in the Gulf, is it realistic to expect other countries to step up and guarantee Gulf security?

3. What do you believe is the best policy toward U.S. bases in the Gulf? Leave them as is, bring the troops home, or move to an over-the-horizon role? What is the downside for the U.S. in continuing to maintain bases there?

4. What is the significance of the new normalization agreements between Israel and the U.A.E. and Bahrain?

5. What are the reasons that the Gulf is such an insecure region? Why are regional states so suspicious of each other?

6. Many experts believe that canceling the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposition of sanctions was a bad idea. What do you think? Should the U.S. insist on changes if the deal is renegotiated?

suggested readings


Gause, F. Gregory, III. “Should We Stay or Should We Go? The United States and the Middle East.” Survival, October/November 2019, pp. 7-24. Concludes the U.S. presence provides important benefits in terms of regional and global influence.


Sherman, Wendy R. “How We Got the Iran Deal and Why We’ll Miss It.” Foreign Affairs, September/October 2018. The lead negotiator of the deal explains why it was a mistake to cancel it.


Don’t forget: Ballots start on page 104!!!!

To access web links to these readings, as well as links to global discussion questions, shorter readings and suggested web sites, go to www.fpa.org/great_decisions and click on the topic under Resources, on the right-hand side of the page.