response to a question about Egypt's and Israel's human rights records, the president inadvertently captured the frustration he and many other American leaders have felt toward the region. By urging the United States to leave its Middle East purgatory, Karlin and Wittes have elevated that misspoken line to policy prescription. But in reality, the Middle East is just another part of the world where the United States has flawed allies, vicious adversaries, and enduring interests. It will not be able to escape from that reality anytime soon, as appealing as that prospect may be.

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We Need to Talk About Israel

Ian S. Lustick

Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes argue that the United States' tendency to overcommit to Middle Eastern partners has created "a moral hazard," prompting them "to act in risky and aggressive ways" while feeling "safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes." As evidence of their claim that much of the chaos in the Middle East can be traced to this effect, Karlin and Wittes cite the perverse incentives that caused leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to adopt destabilizing policies toward Libya, Qatar, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. But they neglect to mention the best example of this dynamic: Israel.

The economic and military aid the United States has provided to Israel, and the political and diplomatic protections it affords that country, have, by any measure, far exceeded anything it has given to the Arab states mentioned in the article. The United States has delivered more than $134 billion in direct economic and military aid to Israel, and it recently pledged another $38 billion to be delivered over the next decade—immense sums, especially considering Israel's relatively small population and high standard of living. And since 1967, the United States has vetoed 41 UN Security Council resolutions criticizing Israel (accounting for 77 percent of all its vetoes during that period).

These policies have emboldened Israeli governments to engage in undesirable behavior in just the way Karlin and Wittes describe Arab states acting in response to overly generous, no-strings-attached support from the United States. The consequences of the cocoon of immunity that successive U.S. administrations have spun around Israeli governments include Israel's defiant nuclear posture, its ruthless and violent policies toward the two million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, its refusal to negotiate constructively with the Palestinians or respond to the decades-old Arab peace initiative, its support for Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and its efforts to drag the United States into a war with Iran. What is more fundamental, by reducing the incentives for restraint, Washington's virtually unconditional support has undermined moderate Israeli politicians and empowered belligerent ones. Why vote for moderates when their willingness to compromise never seems to be required, and when their predictions of a confrontation between the United States and Israel never come true?

By omitting Israel from their analysis (with the exception of one sentence wisely advising against further diplomatic efforts to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), Karlin and Wittes ignore the most consequential alliance the United States has in the Middle East. Concern about the domestic political sensitivity of the question of U.S.-Israeli relations is precisely what explains why U.S. support for Israel has been so free of conditions and mechanisms of accountability. It is also the reason the authors' advice—that U.S. Middle East policy be determined by core U.S. interests instead of the whims of overconfident Middle Eastern leaders—is even more important when applied to Israel. Bellicose Arab allies embroil Washington in needless quarrels abroad, but coddled and overconfident Israeli leaders also whipsaw U.S. presidents at home and thereby hugely complicate the pursuit of U.S. interests.

The problems posed by unconditional U.S. support for Israel are glaringly apparent when it comes to Iran. Karlin and Wittes advise the U.S. government to abandon Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announced policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran in favor of returning to the nuclear deal. Such advice treats the issue as if it could be addressed independent of the pressure that Israel, and the Israel lobby, put on U.S. politicians and policymakers to prevent the agreement, scuttle it after it was signed, and then adopt an all-out strategy of regime change against Iran—including military action—a call that Israeli leaders have been making regularly for the last 15 years. Indeed, a major obstacle to dealing comprehensively with Iran's nuclear threat is that doing so would ultimately mean transforming the Middle East into

a nuclear-weapons-free zone, a proposal that Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states have already made. But this would require Israel to acknowledge and dismantle its large nuclear arsenal, something the United States has refused to advocate.

According to Karlin and Wittes, curbing Iran's "bad behavior" remains a priority for the United States. They recommend doing so in coordination with regional allies. Although they note the difficulties that aggressive Saudi policies toward Qatar pose for an effective alliance in the Gulf against Iran, they ignore the need to distinguish U.S. interests from Israeli policies and actions in Syria, Lebanon, and the Golan Heights. The United States is so closely associated with Israel that no tough but restrained policy toward Iran will be sustainable so long as Israel is launching hundreds of air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, sparring with Iran's Hezbollah allies in Lebanon, and taking every opportunity it can to drive Washington to undertake regime change in Tehran.

The authors also contend that combating terrorism remains a priority, but here again the relationship with Israel gets in the way: nothing makes it easier for the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) or al Qaeda to recruit terrorists than U.S. support for a state that blockades the Gaza Strip, shoots and gases Palestinian protesters, and takes Arab land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to construct settlements. Anti-Zionist, anti-Israel, and anti-Semitic appeals are prominent in the propaganda of these groups not because their leaders necessarily care about the issue but because they know that many of the people they are trying to recruit do.

Karlin and Wittes refer in passing to "recalcitrant domestic politics" in Israel (and among the Palestinians) to advocate an end to U.S. efforts to rescue "the fairy-dusted prospect" of successful peace negotiations. I agree. Improving Israeli-Palestinian relations is not about establishing a separate state in some of the territory Israel rules—the two-state solution. It is—as Karlin and Wittes say is true for all U.S. partners in the Middle East—about building regimes that are "transparent, responsive, accountable, and participatory."

In Israel, that will be achieved not by negotiating an impossible separation of Jews and Palestinians but by democratizing the state that dominates, even if it does not directly govern, all who live between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Working to improve this one-state reality will require that the United States shift its focus, for example, from where Israel constructs housing to whether that housing is available to all who need it, whether Jewish or Arab. The United States often invokes democratic values to justify its special relationship with Israel, but it rarely applies them. Changing that would mean insisting that all who live under Israel's power enjoy civil and political rights and equal protection under the same laws.

Neither U.S. President Donald Trump nor his successor is likely to be able to overcome the United States' own recalcitrant domestic politics when it comes to Israel. But the sound advice offered by Karlin and Wittes—to end extravagant and open-ended commitments to allies in the Middle East in order to reduce reckless behavior and U.S. exposure to its consequences—will never be followed if

U.S. profligacy toward Israel is treated as unmentionable.

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Karlin and Wittes Reply

Our article outlined the growing and profound opportunity costs of the United States' decision to continue wallowing in purgatory in the Middle East and sketched a sustainable path forward for U.S. policy. We wish to add three points in response to Robert Satloff and Ian Lustick.

First, there is a wide space between the overwhelming resources and attention the United States has devoted to the Middle East over the past two decades and what Satloff decries as being "indifferent." As we argued, continued U.S. involvement is crucial for protecting U.S. national security, and ignoring the region is a recipe for disaster. But the Middle East does matter less to U.S. national security than China and Russia, great-power competitors whose visions of international order directly collide with that of the United States and whose militaries present a serious challenge to American power. If the United States cannot credibly compete with China and Russia to defend regional security and order in Asia and Europe, respectively, then its ability to contest their influence in the Middle East will not make up for that failure.

Matching the United States' ambitions in the Middle East to its interests and capabilities cannot be done wholesale. Rather, it requires a clear-eyed assessment of what the region's turmoil, the recalcitrance of the United States' partners, and the United States' own priorities enable it to do, and what they do not. Satloff invokes the half million U.S. troops President George H. W. Bush sent to fight the Persian Gulf War and the more than a quarter million that President George W. Bush sent to wage the Iraq war, but those anomalies are unhelpful in deciding which U.S. military posture will be sustainable or effective in responding to today's and tomorrow's threats. And contrary to what Satloff writes, Secretary of Defense James Mattis did not resign over President Donald Trump's decision to pull troops out of Syria. As his resignation letter made clear, he left because of the president's wanton disregard for U.S. allies and partners—evident in his decision to leave Syria, which blind-sided the European allies fighting there alongside the United States.

Second, the region's disorder limits how much the United States can shape its trajectory, no matter how much it invests. Both friendly and adversarial governments in the Middle East are preoccupied with regional rivalries and what they view as existential challenges from their enemies. Satloff writes that the potential for state-on-state conflict is at its highest in decades, but tensions were certainly higher in the period between 2007 and 2012, when Israel and the United States considered using military force to delay Iran from developing nuclear weapons. We agree with Satloff that the region's ability to "export insecurity" is a genuine concern. Managing that threat, however, does not require an unlimited commitment. With a proper staff and a functioning policy process, the U.S.