Crisis Diplomacy in the Middle East: Insights from the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden Teams

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Brief Analysis

Watch video or read a summary of a special book launch event featuring a former secretary of defense and other veteran officials discussing the lessons learned from decades of American diplomacy and military efforts in the Middle East.

On January 8, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum to mark the launch of Ambassador James Jeffrey's new book Middle East Crises: Expeditionary Diplomacy with the Bush, Obama and Trump Teams **(https://jamesfranklinjeffrey.com/)** *. Speakers included Lloyd J. Austin III, who served as U.S. Secretary of Defense from 2021 to 2025 after a forty-one-year Army career that culminated with leading U.S. Central Command; Ambassador Jeffrey, the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow, who formerly served as U.S. Special Representative for Syria and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; and Dana Stroul, the Institute's Director of Research and Kassen Senior Fellow, who served as Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for the Middle East in 2021-23. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

Lloyd J. Austin III

During his outstanding career, Ambassador Jeffrey has always been "a soldier's diplomat" who understands both the power and the limits of military force. He knows that our exceptional armed forces should only be deployed as a last resort, and only in service of a rigorous strategy. During our work together in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's fall, we forged a close working partnership and brought together our teams from the State and Defense Departments. That spirit resulted in one of the best "team of teams" I have ever seen.

Ambassador Jeffrey well understands the strategic importance of the Middle East and knows that the United States will remain involved there for decades to come. The Middle East is a tinderbox, and without American leadership and close coordination with our allies and partners, the region's challenges will follow us home. Our ability to manage those challenges will depend on America's greatest strategic asset: our people, including those in the armed forces and foreign service. I hope Ambassador Jeffrey's example—and his book—will inspire others to step up and serve.

James Jeffrey

Over the past twenty-five years of difficult, often violent work in the Middle East, many diplomats have served on the frontlines of crisis, and many foreign service officers have risen through the Washington bureaucracy, but few spent half their career in the field and half in Washington. That is the niche filled by my new book. Three themes emerged while I was writing it.

The first concerns the manner in which diplomats work with the military. As someone who has been in both positions, I found the cultures to be incompatible at the organizational level. The way to work together effectively is by collaborating at the personal level. Secretary Austin is my model for this, because this is what he did with me in Iraq and with others elsewhere.

Second, the Middle East will remain central to U.S. policy for a multitude of reasons, including its navigation chokepoints in the Red Sea, Dardanelles, Strait of Hormuz, and Suez Canal, its large proportion of global oil exports, and the threats that do not remain confined there, such as terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The region is crucial not only to U.S. national security, but also to America's overall position in the world, requiring continued forward presence and the type of active strategic engagement that Washington has been pursuing for the past eighty years.

Third, the role of foreign service officers in carrying out U.S. policy is often underappreciated. I was proudest of the people who stood with me in carrying out these difficult assignments and shared in the dangers that uniformed personnel faced every day.

For decades now, the United States has successfully maintained a collective security system to ensure that Eurasia does not fall under the influence of enemy powers. It remains to be seen how the Trump administration continues that policy, particularly without the soft-power elements of the bureaucracy. I spent much of my career engaged in winning hearts and minds, which is an important component of both U.S. national security and collective security. Dismantling the system completely will create longer-term problems for the United States. Even if the next administration is willing and able to regain America's soft-power influence, rebuilding the collective security infrastructure will be difficult if the current administration starts pulling troops back and weakening security collaboration with U.S. partners.

Another layer of complexity is added when different administrations send mixed messages about U.S. intentions. The rules-based international order is a key element of U.S. foreign policy, and violating that system weakens America's position. For example, the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro steps over the line of international law. Although the operation sent a strong deterrent signal, the U.S. military exists to fight wars, not send signals. In Iraq, the Bush administration was justifiably criticized for disbanding the Baath Party and standing down the army, whereas in Venezuela, the Trump administration is facing criticism for leaving the system largely intact. The regime is embedded deeply into Venezuela's state and society, so completely dismantling it would be a massive undertaking. In short, Iraq and Venezuela both show that regime change is a very risky business, regardless of the method.

During his first administration, President Trump displayed admirable reluctance to use military force but employed it decisively when necessary. He was also unpredictable, which introduced dangerous uncertainty; indeed, Iran is likely watching the events in Venezuela nervously.

More broadly, different presidents tend to organize the higher levels of their administration for the internal execution of policy differently. Each administration must tackle the difficult—but necessary—task of forcing the system to function as an institution and bureaucracy. The secretary of state and national security advisor head different bureaucracies, and both require a tremendous amount of leadership and focus that cannot be delegated away. The secretary of state is not guaranteed to have the president's attention, so the centralization seen under the current administration may help ensure that Marco Rubio has the president's ear. After one year, however, the processes of fully leveraging the bureaucracy to serve U.S. interests have not yet developed, which is concerning.

Dana Stroul

The capture of Venezuela's president was an extraordinary operation, highlighting the professionalism of the military and the investments that U.S. leaders have made into that institution. Yet it is concerning that the executive branch failed to consult with Congress about the operation, and that a majority of senators voted to set limits on the kinds of force the president can use. Maintaining bipartisan commitment to the military is important—historically, when such consensus falters, it sends a risky message about U.S. resolve and places men and women in uniform in a precarious position.

Washington should also be thinking about the message that the Venezuela operation sends to the Middle East. The region is a powder keg, with tenuous ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon, uncertain outcomes in Syria and Iraq, renewed conflict in Yemen, and longtime U.S. partners exchanging blows. A weakened adversary like Iran must be watching the action against Venezuela's dictatorship and deciding whether (and where) to respond. Allies and partners are watching as well, assessing the message that Washington is sending about its role inside its own zone of influence. The lack of clarity regarding America's strategic objectives may leave these partners uncertain about both their posture and their relationships with the United States.

Regarding regional security, the response to Iran's April 2024 attack on Israel was an impressive proof of concept for the integrated air and missile defense that U.S. Central Command and allied forces have been working toward for many years. It is difficult to defend each country's airspace individually, but if the region integrates its defenses and early warning systems, everyone's collective defense is bolstered. The successes that enabled the 2024 defensive operation required not only technical advancements and expertise, but also a high degree of commitment and investment from the United States and its partners. This included substantial leadership and political will to convince them that collective defense was a priority, and sustained effort from the top to the bottom of the command structure. What was unique about that moment was the shared sense of threat from Iran and the shared interest in defending collective sovereignty. As that sense of threat has diminished, the sense of unified purpose is not as strong as it was in April 2024, even though Iran has been working quickly to rebuild its offensive capabilities. Absent U.S. leadership and concerted pressure, it

will be challenging to build on the progress that was made.

In broader policy terms, bureaucracy and institutions are key to U.S. success—regardless of what negotiations occur at the highest levels, having people on the ground to implement policy and coordinate between departments and partner governments is crucial. Today, America's entire bureaucratic apparatus is in a difficult position. Excluding it from the decisionmaking process has impeded the task of implementing policies as they are decided. In post-conflict scenarios like those in Syria, Yemen, Gaza, and even Iraq, reconstruction requires both political and material resources, which the United States has historically committed and encouraged others to follow suit. Yet the current absence of U.S. technical expertise leaves a vacuum in the nascent political transitions across the region, while asking the military to play a larger role affects both U.S. readiness and America's image in the region. A robust bureaucracy is crucial if Washington intends to follow through on recent and pending agreements in the Middle East.

This summary was prepared by Kate Chesnutt. ❖

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