

U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

It's not too late to discourage Iranian adventurism and lead a return to relative calm, but mistakes by successive U.S. administrations and the region's own weaknesses have contributed to a dangerous situation.

Events over the past three months in the Middle East—from Kirkuk to Syria, Beirut to Sana, from Iranian surrogate missile strikes against key Saudi and Emirati targets to Israel's increasingly dramatic attacks against Hezbollah and Iran in Syria—form a pattern, illustrating the breadth of regional crises, Iran's facility in benefiting from them, and the absence of a guiding U.S. strategy that can mobilize our considerable diplomatic, military, and economic assets.

Since this committee last met on the issue of the Middle East, the region has seen momentous events. The United States has led an international coalition to success in the conventional war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, Iran, aided by Russia, has turned the tide in the Syrian civil war decisively in favor of the criminal Assad regime. Finally, President Trump announced a new Iran policy October 13.

Yet the region is less secure, and the U.S.-led regional security order more endangered, than at any time since 1979. The reason is that while one threat, Sunni Islamic terrorism, has been temporarily defeated in Syria and Iraq, and contained elsewhere, the more strategic threat, Iran, is growing rapidly, to some degree abetted by Russia. These two threats are organically linked; Iran benefits from ungoverned territories overrun by Islamic terrorists, from Yemen to Syria, and justifies its aggression as "counterterrorism." Meanwhile, when the United States fails to contain Iran, Sunni populations embrace groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda for self-protection.

President Trump's October 13 policy announcement on Iran, despite much mention of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known, wisely set the first U.S. priority as countering Iran's destabilizing activity throughout the region. Along with the president's commitment to a Palestinian-Israeli accord, and the fight against al-Qaeda, Taliban, and Islamic State terrorists throughout the region, we have the outlines of a

new regional policy, built on our success against IS, based on local partners, diplomatic mobilization, and limited but decisive military power. Yet so far, that policy has not spelled out how, specifically, we will contain Iran, nor reassured our regional partners.

But Iran, enabled by Russia, does have a detailed plan for the region: the Prime Minister Hariri fiasco in Lebanon, death of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, missile attacks on Riyadh, threats to Israel out of Syria and Lebanon, and crushing of the Iraqi Kurdish independence effort all bear Iran's fingerprints directly or indirectly. And absent a detailed game plan made in Washington, and successes implementing it, our partners are "winging it" in uncoordinated ways that Iran then exploits to further expand its gains. The risk is great that one or another such incident will explode into a regional conflict if we do not quickly coordinate with our partners and explain our plan to contain Iran.

REGION'S IMPORTANCE, AND U.S. ASSETS

Any U.S. plan has to start with basics—the importance of the region to the security and well-being of Eurasia, a core U.S. goal since 1917. The Middle East is an essential unifying component of Eurasia, the source of many of the world's conflicts since 1947, and a key element in the U.S.-led global security system. Failure to resolve conflicts there affects our domestic security and allies' very stability, as we have seen with terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland and Western Europe, destabilizing refugee flows out of Syria, and threats from weapons of mass destruction. In addition, the region's energy supplies still remain critical for global economic health.

With the demise of the Islamic State, the main threat to the U.S.-led order is clearly Iran. But Iran's threat is, in Henry Kissinger's words, both as a state—pressing its hegemonic ambitions—and as a revolutionary, theocratic cause. This latter dimension stimulates the other great regional threat --Sunni extremist violence. I was witness to the rise of the Islamic State from a minor al-Qaeda band in Mosul in 2012 to a major regional force by 2014 due to the oppression of Sunni Arabs by Iranian surrogates, former Iraqi president Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, and President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. While the Islamic State is now largely defeated in the Levant, we risk a repeat of 2012-14.

Any U.S. plan can draw on significant assets. Most of the states in the region are our security partners, with a huge conventional superiority, along with U.S. Central Command, over Iran, even with Russian support. The vast majority of oil exports from the region come from U.S. partners. Iran, despite its claims as an Islamic revolutionary force, can mobilize local allies mainly from the Shia Muslim 15 percent of the region's population, and in some places, such as Iraq, many Shia are uneasy at Iranian encroachment. By supporting the genocidal Assad regime, including its chemical weapons use, and provoking massive refugee flows into, and terrorist attacks on, Syria's neighbors and Europe, Iran and Russia have lost any moral argument.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Any U.S. plan should start by analyzing Iran's strategy. That strategy, to avoid responsibility and retaliation while advancing its cause in states where governance is weak, focuses on local surrogates more loyal to Tehran than to their own countries. It also exploits instability, confident that the United States, European allies, and even some in the region prefer short-term stability to effective countering of Iran's exploitation of weak governments and conflicts. The United States thus needs to build up the region's nation-states and react quickly to governance failures that provoke terrorism and open the door to Iranian intervention.

Any detailed policy on Iran also should answer six questions: (1) what are the basic goals of the policy; (2) what to do now with the central front, Iraq and Syria; (3) how to mobilize allies; (4) what is the role of the JCPOA; (5) how to respond when Iran strikes back; (6) whether and how to communicate with Tehran. My suggestions on each follow:

1. The United States should neither strive for regime change nor portray the Iranian challenge in Shia-Sunni terms. Either approach will force Iran to mobilize even more, undercut potential partners including Turkey and Europe,

and allow Russia to champion Tehran and Shia Muslims. Rather, emphasis should be on rolling back Iran's malignant efforts to undermine and ultimately capture states.

2. The two key fronts are Iraq and Syria, which should be considered, as Iran considers them, to be one theater—but with different approaches. In Iraq, we have a relatively friendly government with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, deep ties with much of the population, and considerable anti-Iranian sentiment including among some Iraqi Shia clerics. The United States should lead the international effort to integrate Iraq back into the regional and global community, including with reconstruction and energy-sector assistance. The United States should also press for a continued U.S. military training presence, to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State and ensure Iraq is not dependent on Iran for military support. The goal should not be Iraq as a "Middle Eastern West Berlin," which is not feasible, but rather as a Finland, which allows neither Iran nor the United States to project power out of it. The Iraqi government, egged on by Iran, should not be permitted to cherry-pick relations with us, enjoying our economic and diplomatic support while acquiescing in Iran's subversion and military moves.

In Syria, the announcement by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis that U.S. troops would stay on, to counter a possible return of the Islamic State, build up local counterterrorism allies, and contribute to the Geneva process, is important. The United States cannot dictate events in Syria, but by its presence can contest Iran's—and Russia's—freedom of action. Aside from U.S. enclaves and local allies in the north and south, U.S. allies Israel and Turkey also operate militarily in Syria, and have a similar core goal of containing Iran, although differences on tactics, particularly with Turkey, are formidable. UN Security Council Resolution 2254 gives the United States and the region a legal justification for a say in any Syrian internal political organization, given the horrific impact of the Syrian civil war not only on the Syrian people but on the region. Syria also desperately needs reconstruction, and this gives the United States and its European allies leverage with Syria and its supporters. Pulling all these assets together to contain Iran in Syria is a dynamic, uncertain endeavor, but far less risky than abandoning Syria once again.

3. Various regional partners and European allies are concerned about Iran, but absent a common U.S.-led plan their responses have been ill-coordinated and contradictory. Clarity on U.S. plans and goals and particularly success against Iran will help mobilize allies, but the United States must discipline the system and overwatch partners constantly. The price they pay for U.S. leadership has to be coordination with Washington before acting.

4. Absent compelling evidence that the international community, as in 2012, will rally behind the United States to impose draconian oil sanctions on Iran, Washington should not pull out of the JCPOA. U.S. sanctions without international cooperation would have little impact on Iran, but would give Iran an excuse under JCPOA Article 36 to violate some of its commitments and thus move closer to a nuclear weapons breakout, while the world blames the United States. The president's policy of keeping the agreement in limbo, criticizing its flaws, especially missile activity and the sunset clauses, and discouraging business deals with Iran, is sensible.

5. Bitter experience over decades with Iran demonstrates it responds violently when challenged, but in ways that make its responsibility unclear. The United States needs to know, and communicate, how it will respond, including the possibility of retaliation directly against Iran, if it wants to deter Iranian attacks.

6. Opposing a foe does not exclude communicating with it. But until the United States is clear on its own plans, has won partners' trust, and scored successes, communication with Iran should be limited to signaling redlines and deconflicting, as in the Gulf. Eventually, however, the United States would need to clarify to Iran what U.S. goals are.

It is not too late for the United States to lead a return to regional stability and relative calm, but mistakes by successive administrations and the region's own weakness have contributed to a dangerous situation. The United States should ensure that everything it does in the region discourages, not encourages, Iran. That has not always been the case.

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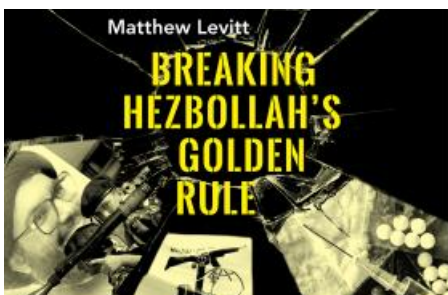
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