The United States Needs a Middle East Strategy

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Brief Analysis

Without a defined strategy, events will determine policy.

As the president travels to the United Nations this week, the Middle East, along with North Korea, will top the agenda. There, the United States faces a dramatic escalation of tension for which it is not yet adequately prepared. Iran and its Shia militia proxies, abetted by Russian airpower, are positioning themselves to fill the vacuum in Iraq and Syria after the defeat of the Islamic State (IS). The spread of Iranian presence and influence poses a risk to Israel and Jordan, the Gulf states, and potentially also Turkey. Moreover, as Iran undermines the sovereignty of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, with Shia militias far more loyal to the Islamic Republic than to their own states, stability and the regional security system maintained by the United States are almost certain to break down.

U.S. support for regional order normally would be self-evident, particularly given America's stakes in the Middle East. The region continues to be a major contributor to global energy and, when not managed, remains a breeder of terrorism and a dangerous source of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Yet the combination of two U.S.-led conflicts having gone badly, together with deep dismay about the region's constant violence, has undercut the American taste for the regional balancer role. While the Trump administration certainly sees Iran as a regional threat, and has taken tactical steps against it, it is still reviewing its policies and has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy. Unfortunately, Iran does have one and is acting on it.

The clock is now ticking for the United States, and if it doesn't develop a strategy, events will drive policy. In the

Levant, two conflicts -- the war in Syria and the campaign against IS -- are coming to a close. In the first, it is now clear that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad -- thanks to Russia and Iran -- will survive and control most but not all of Syria. And with the second, the buffer that separated the Iran-Syria efforts from the U.S.-led effort against IS will increasingly disappear. Soon, the United States and local allies throughout Syria and Iraq will be cheek by jowl with Iranian surrogates, as they are now in southern Syria, Manbij in the north, and near Mosul. And without IS to justify this presence, the United States must withdraw or use its footholds to resist Iran's program to convert Syria and Iraq into vassal states.

If any U.S. plan to contest Iran's expansion does not include Syria and Iraq, then where could the United States draw the line? An Iran hegemonic in that region would split the Middle East, threaten Israel and Turkey, and by dominating Arab areas undercut the Arab world's claim to control its destiny. Backed by a resurgent Russia, such an Iran could seriously threaten U.S. interests and friends.

Washington recognizes this. That is why the Trump administration is reviewing its policies toward Iran, designating more Iranian officials and companies as facilitators of terrorism, and threatening to declare that Iran is not fulfilling its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is known. But even taken together, these steps do not amount to a real strategy. Real strategies identify a country's most important objectives, formulate policies that allow them to be pursued, and mobilize allies and national assets, including the full array of diplomatic, economic, and military tools, to achieve the stated aims. Historically, presidents have found it possible to concentrate maximum attention and comprehensive strategies on only a very few issues at a time. Examples are German unification in NATO with George H. W. Bush; the Balkans with Bill Clinton; Iraq with George W. Bush; and the Iran nuclear program with Barack Obama. Other policies where full presidential buy-in was lacking -- such as those advanced by former secretaries of state John Kerry with Syria and an Israeli-Palestinian deal, or Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice with North Korea -- fall short of this "real strategy" standard. Thus, to deal effectively with Iran, the president has to make it one of his two or three signature foreign policy strategies.

What principles should guide such a strategy?

First, work quietly with U.S. allies to help them feel a part of the Iran strategy -- ensuring that the United States can maximize leverage on Iran, keep it isolated, and preserve the allied stake in sticking with the effort. (With allies, think through the potential risks as well as the possible impact of actions on other issues such as North Korea -- or how actions addressing North Korea will affect Iran strategy.)

Second, if Iran is the main threat facing the United States in the region, the administration cannot subordinate its strategy toward the Iranians to the fight against IS. Iran is a state that poses a far larger danger, especially given its successful use of Shia militias. And an IS-centric policy is likely self-defeating because Iran's sectarian-driven policies run the risk of alienating Sunnis and recreating the conditions that produced IS in the first place.

Third, recognize that Russian president Vladimir Putin cannot fix America's dilemma with Iran in Syria. Communication and coordination with the Russians makes sense, but unless the United States is willing to raise the price to the Russians, they will continue to treat the Iranians and the Shia militias as their foot soldiers. Making clear that America will not roll back the Iranians or their proxies in Syria, but that it will use its far superior airpower to prevent them from expanding further, is the only policy that would force Putin to try to constrain Iranian moves. The last thing he wants is an international perception that U.S. power is determining the outcome in Syria.

Fourth, exert American leverage to end the imbroglio that has pitted Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt against Qatar. While Qatar needs to change its behavior, it is time to end the distraction and mobilize all U.S. partners, with their superior population, geography, military capabilities, and wealth, which collectively dwarf the Iran-Russia partnership.

Fifth, repeatedly explain the U.S. policy to friends and enemies alike; no one should doubt American intentions.

Sixth, acknowledge, don't flout, international norms. The JCPOA may be a juicy target, but approach it in a way that shows Washington is taking account of its allies' concerns even as it wants them to address the dangers U.S. officials see in the accord.

Seventh, do not pull out of areas or back down from confrontations unless the risks are overwhelming. U.S. credibility, the glue of all security systems, is still vulnerable despite recent military responses authorized by President Trump.

And finally, to be successful, the United States must not overreach and push its demands too far. President John F. Kennedy understood this with the Cuban Missile Crisis, but overambitious goals have haunted the United States in the Middle East. With vastly superior airpower to that deployed by Russia to turn the tide in the Syrian war, America can surely contain Iran and its proxies. This is neither the time nor the place for the United States to commit ground forces -- containing the Iranian presence and creating real buffers and safe areas for local partners in Syria and elsewhere will address U.S. interests and needs.

James F. Jeffrey spent thirty years in the State Department, including posts as ambassador to Turkey and Iraq. Dennis Ross served in five presidential administrations, most recently as special assistant to President Obama. They are, respectively, the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow and the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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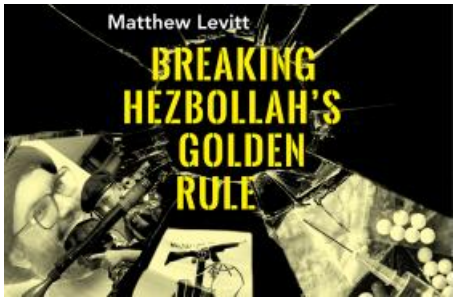

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