

Focus on Clear Goals to Contain Iran in Iraq and Syria

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#), [Wa'el Alzayat \(/experts/wael-alzayat\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



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The Powell Doctrine, a set of principles devised in the 1980s, can guide the United States in promoting regional stability and averting future disasters.

With the liberation of Mosul from ISIS and the impending conquest of the "Caliphate" capital, Raqqa, the U.S. is at a decision point in the Middle East. But it does not yet have a coherent strategy, as has been pointed out by Emile Simpson in a savvy piece in *Foreign Policy*, "This Is How Great Wars Get Started," and by *Washington Post* editors.

The biggest problem facing the administration is an Iran poised to control Iraq and Syria, and thus a corridor from Tehran to southern Lebanon, in the wake of ISIS's defeat. Tehran, with its Shia militias and missile arsenals and at least limited Russian support, seeks thereby to upend regional security, threatening Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and ultimately the Gulf states from this corridor. The Trump Administration signed up to contain this threat at the May Riyadh summit but so far has not figured out how.

One reason is that the U.S. is still focused on defeating ISIS. But ISIS and Iran are linked: Iran's enabling of the brutal anti-Sunni Arab policies of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from 2011 to 2014 gave rise to ISIS in the first place. If the American-led regional security system, which failed then to rein in Iran, fails again, millions of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria likely will turn again to some radical Islamist movement.

Recent U.S. actions to push back militarily against Assad and his Iranian allies and the limited Russian-U.S. ceasefire in southwest Syria have stabilized somewhat the complicated Syrian battlefield, but these actions do not add up to a strategy, particularly as U.S. officials keep asserting the U.S. is in Syria only to fight ISIS.

Even if the U.S. wants to duck such a strategy, the clock is ticking. Once the ISIS "state" is destroyed, will the U.S. abandon those areas where U.S. forces operate, along with its Syrian allies, to a vengeful Assad? And will it withdraw

its forces then from Iraq, given the deterioration of security there after the U.S. withdrew in 2011? And will U.S. allies -- Turkey, Jordan, and Israel -- consent to Iranian and Hezbollah elements on their borders? Thus Washington has no choice but to develop an Iran strategy, and quickly, to answer these questions.

But developing one is not easy, as the complications are daunting: the administration's pursuit of potentially conflicting goals -- fighting ISIS and containing Iran; the Obama Administration precedent putting Iran containment off limits; and Russia's opaque role as a quasi-Iranian ally.

But beyond these specific problems, the U.S. has endemic problems developing strategy, often confusing it with some headline objective -- such as, in the May Saudi-U.S. Strategic Vision Declaration, "contain Iran's malign influence" -- without follow-through. Another problem is a kneejerk "we must fix the whole Middle East" reaction to security problems, manifest with the Bush Administration in Iraq and Obama's 2009 Cairo speech. Certainly, the region's security problems flow from underlying political, economic, and cultural factors, but the U.S. has learned since 2001 it cannot easily fix such structural instability, but rather must deal with its manifestations.

To that end, the Administration should turn to the 1980s "Powell Doctrine," a set of principles developed by then Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and then General Colin Powell. While the Doctrine is associated with large-scale troop commitments, its logic fits any political-military problem, including when forces are limited and ground fighting is done by local partners (as in Bosnia and Kosovo).

The Doctrine's first principle, ensure "vital interests at stake," can be affirmed in Syria. Iran's expansion could provoke conflict with key U.S. allies, the regional Sunni states, Turkey, and Israel. Such a conflict, as in the 1970s, could throttle the region's oil exports still vital to the world economy. In addition, Iran's expansion threatens Israel's survival and undercuts state sovereignty elsewhere through local surrogates more loyal to Tehran than to their own governments (the Hezbollah model in Lebanon). Moreover, general Middle East insecurity typically leads bad actors to seek nuclear weapons. Finally, continued turmoil has displaced millions, undermining nearby states and the EU.

Given that the situation thus meets the Doctrine's vital interests criteria, how can they be advanced? The Doctrine advocates "clear political and military objectives" that the U.S. must see to "victory." But such victory is not necessarily "total"; Powell defined it in limited terms in the Gulf War -- that is, liberate Kuwait, not topple Saddam Hussein.

Analogous to U.S. action in the 1980s to push back against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and Iran in the Gulf, such a limited U.S. objective in Syria and Iraq post-ISIS would be to harass and contain Iranian expansion while preserving moderates and their communities, rather than to destroy Iran or topple Assad.

In Iraq, the U.S. would support the Abadi government, lead international reconstruction, maintain a special relationship with Kurdistan without encouraging its independence, and integrate Iraq into the global financial and energy system. The U.S. would also keep a small military contingent there to root out ISIS remnants and develop the Iraqi military, as well as signal U.S. commitment. The strategic goal would not be a new "West Berlin" but a "Finland." Iraq would not be fully in either the U.S. or Iranian camp, but independent enough to block Iran from projecting power out of Iraq as it does in Lebanon. Such a course of action could exploit concerns of Iraqis from all sects and ethnicities about Iranian encroachment in Iraq. If this scenario is not achievable, the fallback would be close U.S. security ties with an autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq, traditionally pro-Western.

In Syria, the picture is more complex and challenging, but there too the U.S. can apply the Doctrine's underlying principles by protecting hard-won gains against ISIS and leveraging them to push major stakeholders (Assad, Arab opposition, Syrian Kurds, Iranians, Russians) to accept continued de-escalation until a more permanent political arrangement is reached. This means continuing to work with both Arab and Kurdish local actors to flush ISIS out of Raqqa and other areas, and to provide humanitarian and reconstruction support to liberated communities so they

can begin to rebuild their shattered lives and perhaps entice the displaced to return. But this will have to be accompanied by credible deterrence against regime, Russian, and Iranian attacks, not too dissimilar to what the Trump administration has done in response to Assad's chemical weapons use and harassment of counter-ISIS forces in southern Syria.

The objective of any U.S. military response to those violations has to be clear: to protect newly liberated areas and members of the international community who are helping there, rather than to initiate any future offensive operations against the regime or Russian interests in Syria. Of course, protecting areas in southern Syria, Raqqa, and the north would not only help civilians there but also undermine Iran's efforts at extending its arc of control from Tehran to Beirut and serve as a pressure point in support of more serious political negotiations.

In line with the Doctrine's emphasis on committing "all the resources necessary to win," this strategy would draw on the unrivaled diplomatic clout and decisive military superiority, and thus "escalation dominance," of U.S. forces in the region, on-the-ground partners, the international anti-ISIS coalition, Turkey, Sunni Arab states, and Israel.

The strategy also aligns with the Doctrine's next principle, "only take on commitments that can gain the support of the American people and Congress," as the costs to the U.S. are limited, and the threats the strategy would counter are very serious.

Finally, this strategy meets the Doctrine's last principle: committing U.S. forces "only as a last resort." The U.S. has tried the other "resorts" already with the Obama strategy of building on the Iranian nuclear agreement and then Secretary of State John Kerry's shuttle diplomacy on Syria to restrain Iran by accommodating Iranian and Russian interests without recourse to force. This strategy has failed.

Consequently, the Administration needs urgently a comprehensive approach toward Iran, centered in Syria and Iraq, including military means, to restore regional stability. Otherwise, new disasters, fueling extremism and likely new WMD programs, will emerge.

James F. Jeffrey, the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, is the former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Iraq, and Albania. Wa'el Alzayat, CEO of the Emgage Foundation, served previously as a senior policy advisor to U.S. ambassador to the UN Samantha Power and as the State Department's Syria outreach coordinator. ❖

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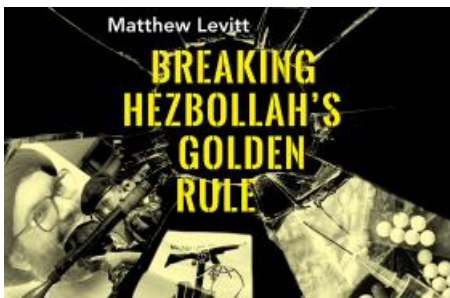
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