

# Stavridis, Allen Assess Global Strategic Threats

## Former Officers Honored with Scholar-Statesman Award

by [John Allen \(/experts/john-allen\)](/experts/john-allen), [James Stavridis \(/experts/james-stavridis\)](/experts/james-stavridis)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



#### [John Allen \(/experts/john-allen\)](/experts/john-allen)

Gen. John Allen, USMC (Ret.), a member of the Institute's Board of Advisors, is former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.



#### [James Stavridis \(/experts/james-stavridis\)](/experts/james-stavridis)

James Stavridis is a retired U.S. Navy admiral who served as NATO's supreme allied commander. He is now dean of Tuft University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.



Brief Analysis

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**In a candid conversation, recently retired American military leaders assessed the foreign policy challenges confronting the United States as President-elect Donald J. Trump prepares to take office.**

In a candid conversation with Washington Institute executive director Dr. Robert Satloff, Gen. John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.), and Adm. James G. Stavridis, USN (Ret.), assessed the foreign policy challenges confronting the United States as President-elect Donald J. Trump prepares to take office.

Allen and Stavridis appeared with Satloff at a November 29, 2016, event in New York City where the two former officers were presented with the Institute's [2016 Scholar-Statesman Award \(/press-room/view/institute-names-military-leaders-john-r-allen-and-james-g-stavridis-schol\)](/press-room/view/institute-names-military-leaders-john-r-allen-and-james-g-stavridis-schol). Previous award winners include President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Tony Blair, Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and secretaries of state Henry Kissinger and Condoleezza Rice.

During the hour-long exchange, Stavridis and Allen discussed a host of Middle East and global issues.

**What is the most urgent and important security issues facing the**

## **United States?**

Allen stated that if the U.S. does not solve the issues associated with the Middle East, “we are heading for a great strategic crisis.”

Stavridis cited North Korea as the most urgent tactical problem, saying “North Korea has nuclear weapons and an unpredictable leader.... We have no effective means of controlling North Korea.” He said that cybersecurity is the most important strategic issue, calling it the “leaning tower of U.S. strategic vulnerability.”

## **How should the United States deal with Russia and China?**

Allen cautioned that the U.S. cannot focus on Russian activities narrowly. He said, “The relationship with Russia has to include, the relationship in Syria, the relationship as it relates to Crimea, the relationship as it relates to the eastern third of the Ukraine... the major cyber incidents, the destabilization of the eastern portion of NATO -- we have to keep an eye on all of this.”

Stavridis recommended that the “U.S. must confront Russia where we must, and cooperate where we can.” He said that the U.S. should confront Russia on its support for Assad, its cyber activities, and the annexation of Crimea, and cooperate on issues including counter narcotics, counterterrorism, and the Arctic. He added, “I would argue where this is a zone where ‘The Art of the Deal’ may actually be helpful.”

## **Why didn't the U.S. help create humanitarian safe zones in Syria?**

Allen explained that while the U.S. military had the capacity to create “safe zones” or “no-fly zones,” the civilian leadership withheld approval in order to avoid a possible confrontation with Syrian or Russian defenses. “We have consistently made a decision to do something and then we suboptimize the implementation, and we suboptimize what we let the U.S. military do when the time came to do it, and that really tied our hands in many respects,” he said.

Calling Syrian President Basheer al-Assad a dictator “beyond the limits of what we’ve seen” since the end of the Cold War, Stavridis asserted that the U.S. had the responsibility to protect Syrian civilians. “I believe there is a responsibility to protect under international law when there is such an enormous failure of the international system that we owe a response and not only for the moral and ethical reasons but also for the pragmatic reasons,” he explained. “This is an area of extraordinary importance in which our principal ally, Israel, resides at the center. We cannot allow this to spin into a chaotic scenario so I think we need a stronger set of political responses.”

## **Will ISIS be defeated in Mosul?**

Allen, who served as the chief architect of the global coalition to defeat ISIS, stated that there is no question that the U.S. and its allies will take back Mosul and defeat ISIS militarily. “The problem with ISIL is that we as a nation are not looking at... the social, economic, political, religious causal factors that have radicalized hundreds of thousands of men and women around the world that have given us a succession of extremist organizations.” ISIS has contributed to extremism and terrorism in its “provinces” as well as in Western European countries. He concludes that “we are going to be fighting extremists for the foreseeable future and not necessarily [in] the Middle East.”

According to Stavridis, the two keys to success for the U.S. in the Middle East are creating coalitions with local partners and leveraging technology to avoid large U.S. troop deployments to the region. He emphasized that the U.S. has to “own” social networks on the Internet just as much as it owns the battle space in Iraq. “The U.S. excels at launching missiles and military operations around the world, but it needs to improve at launching ideas,” he commented.

## **How should the Trump administration deal with Iran?**

Calling Iran “the principal destabilizing threat in the region,” Allen advocated partnerships with the local Sunni governments “not just to deal with the Sunni extremists but to deal with the Iranians.” He has met with local Sunni

leaders recently and they complained that the United States has withdrawn its traditional support, leaving them “with a sense of abandonment.” Nevertheless, “they are ready to partner with us in ways to stabilize the region.”

He noted that military leaders in Sunni states have confided that the region would be even more insecure were it not for Israel’s military strength. “[Israel] is the cornerstone of stability in the region and they are very thankful for that,” he said.

Calling Iran an “utterly destabilizing force,” Stavridis agreed that local partnerships, including Israel, are central to combating Tehran’s growing presence in the region. He highlighted Jordan role as “a force for good.”

## If they had a magic wand to fix a single public policy issue, what would it be?

Allen said that he would tackle the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, an issue he addressed as a special envoy in the Obama administration. “I believe that Middle East peace is attainable and I believe it has to be attained,” he said.

Stavridis chose to focus on a domestic issue: “The thing I would change immediately is the sense of gridlock in the political system. The idea of being a centrist, the idea of finding compromise, the idea of overcoming gridlock has left us, and it worries me deeply. If I had a magic wand I would wave it over ‘the swamp that must be drained’ and create a sense of shared responsibility for all of our futures.” ❖

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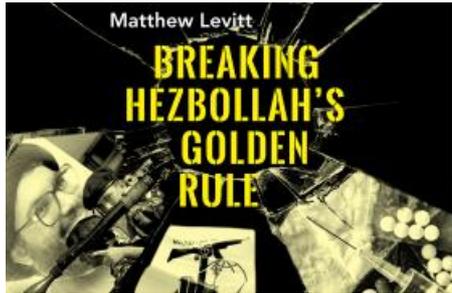
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