

# If This Is Obama's Middle East 'Balancing Act,' God Help Us

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**Robert Malley wasn't mistaken in recounting how the president has conducted regional policy; the problem lies in the worrisome objectives that seem to underpin those policies, which could cause further damage through year's end.**

**T**he Middle East remains the most dangerous, most complicated, and perhaps most controversial element in the Obama administration's conduct of world affairs. In an [interview \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/15/a-defense-of-obamas-middle-east-balancing-act-syria-russia-iran-nsc/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/15/a-defense-of-obamas-middle-east-balancing-act-syria-russia-iran-nsc/) with *Foreign Policy* contributor Aaron David Miller, Robert Malley, special assistant to the president and coordinator for the Middle East on the National Security Council staff, discussed President Barack Obama's Middle East policies in depth. It is not only a polished, sober assessment of the actions and interests of the Obama administration, it's a surprising one, too -- it's rare that a White House insider and counsel to the president gives us such insight into how off-base much of Obama's approach to the region is. As ambassador to Turkey and Iraq during the Obama administration's first term, I had a front row seat as much of that approach developed.

To be fair, I have few quibbles with Malley's rendition of Obama's actions. His account of the Syrian chemical weapons denouement gives more credit to the administration's decisiveness and less to pure chance -- Putin compromising to thwart U.S. military action that Obama had essentially ruled out -- than the public record justifies. Malley is basically right, however, in his assessment of the Iran nuclear deal, and the role of "tough multilateral diplomacy" and threat of force in achieving a breakthrough.

But a list of American actions does not alone make a coherent mosaic. What gives context are the objectives that underlie activity. Malley, in the two he stresses, and the one he basically ignores, reveals why -- as Miller noted -- many believe "the Middle East is going to look a lot worse when Barack Obama leaves office than when he arrived."

For Malley, the core administration objectives are 1) avoiding attacks, particularly terrorist, on Americans ("the president's priority ... must be to defend America's security") and, 2) avoiding disastrous military adventures

("costly, open-ended conflicts"; "getting bogged down in military adventures"; and avoiding the myth "that military victory invariably translates into lasting political success"). The problem is that these objectives do not add up to a coherent policy -- at best, they are things to be careful about when doing foreign policy. But Malley insists these are the standards by which to measure the administration.

He has half a point with the first. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the American people have been fixated on avoiding any terrorist attack on U.S. soil. In fact, a [recent poll](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/22/poll-42-percent-of-americans-say-they-are-less-safe-from-terrorism-than-before-911/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/22/poll-42-percent-of-americans-say-they-are-less-safe-from-terrorism-than-before-911/>) found that 42 percent of Americans say they are less safe from terrorism than before 9/11. But that persistent fear can lead us to ignore what was long thought vital: that if America does not deal with the broader threats to peace that so devastated Europe and Asia in the past century, it places its own security at existential risk.

To emphasize the importance of avoiding unsuccessful military operations -- his second "core" objective -- Malley inflates the dangers. His target, as often with this administration, is the last administration: "nor should one forget that when Obama took office, the United States had roughly 150,000 troops in Iraq, an unsustainable allocation of human and material resources that was harming our global security posture. Iran also was steadily advancing its nuclear program, presenting the threat of a dangerous military confrontation." We "forget" this, of course, because it didn't actually happen as Malley describes: Obama became president not in 2003, but 2009. By then, almost all fighting had ceased in Iraq, President George W. Bush had begun withdrawing forces and had committed to pull out all troops before 2012. Likewise, Bush had opted not to confront Iran militarily over nuclear programs, begun the P5+1 negotiations with Tehran, mobilized the international community with four Security Council resolutions, and negotiated with the Iranians in Baghdad to avoid tensions over Iraq.

Even more troubling is Malley's lack of emphasis on the classic U.S. foreign policy objective since the 1940s: the maintenance of a global security order based on liberal values, international law, and trade and finance -- all enabled by collective security centered on America's readiness to defend these goals; not only against ideological rivals but also regional hegemony seeking to subjugate neighbors and carve out no-go zones against us.

Malley touches on this objective in describing the Obama administration's balancing act, but does not dwell on what seemingly should be a central objective. That's understandable, perhaps, as the administration put little emphasis on its role in maintaining global order in the Middle East. Initially Obama's White House team did not have to prioritize these issues, as the focus was -- apart from Iran's nukes -- nonstate actors and the Arab Spring. But recently we've witnessed serious challenges to that order: the rise of the Islamic State; the Bashar al-Assad regime's slaughter of its population and subsequent fallout; the refugee tidal wave across the Middle East and into Europe; Iran's infiltration of four Arab states; and Russia's military return.

None of these threats -- apart from the Islamic State, and then only recently -- has generated a robust American response: Washington was inactive (against the Islamic State, initially, and in countering Russia's moves), responded inadequately (in supporting the moderate Syrian opposition), or acted contradictorily and weakly (with Iran in regard to missile tests, downplaying the seizure of U.S. sailors, a curious \$400 million payment, and so on.)

All of this, Miller notes, is alarming America's partners. In response, Malley makes the point that Washington's partners are aware that the United States is supportive of them, but he also is in turn defensive and admonishing: America sells our friends lots of weapons and uses military force. Those opposing America's Iran policies can't overcome their "conventional wisdom." Don't assume the United States will support allies if their actions work against American interests, say in fomenting a "Sunni-Shia confrontation."

But perceptions in the region are quite different from Malley's presentation. In fact, no-risk, no-casualty American

aerial campaigns against terrorists convince no one that Uncle Sam will be there when things get rough. Ducking military challenges that carry risks is what our partners see. The administration may want to dismiss those unhappy with Washington's Iran policy as hopeless opponents of a reasonable (and here I agree with Malley) nuclear deal. But aside from Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, nobody in the region opposes that agreement explicitly. Rather, understanding that this agreement will give Iran financial and diplomatic benefits useful for its hegemonic agenda, they expected America to understand these concerns -- and many thought they got Washington's commitment to do just that at two summits with the president. But instead of reassurance, they get warnings about unleashing a Sunni-Shiite confrontation.

One explanation for Obama's failure to respond effectively to threats to the regional order by Iran, the Islamic State, and now the Russians is the administration's obsession with Malley's two objectives, especially avoiding military missteps. Running a deterrence policy always risks military setbacks. But if minimizing risk is job one, deterrence necessarily gets short shrift. Even worse might come. Malley's emphasis on "testing" the Russians, his assumptions that Putin could bog down in Syria where Assad can't win, his hope for a better relationship with Iran, and his disparaging tone toward partners together suggest that perhaps the administration does have a Middle East grand strategy, albeit one not vetted publicly: to "[share \(http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/)" (the president's word, not Malley's) the region with those anti-status quo forces now helping turn it into a nightmare. In this regard, Malley's most worrisome words refer to the end of Obama's time in the White House: "six months is a long time ... there is still so much to be done."

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