

# A Policy to Defeat Both ISIL and Iran

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May 26, 2015

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**The Middle East state system is under relentless pressure, and preserving it will require a long-term vision for shoring up U.S. allies, rolling back ISIL, and**

## countering the Iranians.

**T**he Middle East today is consumed by conflict, driven primarily by struggles over identity and interest. Individually, these struggles threaten the survival of states across the region, including Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Collectively, they risk the collapse of the entire Middle East state system.

This distant phenomenon has a direct impact on U.S. interests. The weaker the states in the Middle East become, the easier it is for terrorist groups and terrorist-supporting states to plan, recruit and operate against the U.S. and its partners. Should this loss of control continue, the U.S. more and more will be forced to contend with plots against not just its friends but also against the American homeland.

There are two main external threats to the Middle East state system. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS or the Islamic State, embodies the most direct threat, particularly with its declaration of a caliphate designed to replace existing states. The Islamic Republic of Iran also constitutes a threat, perhaps not as blatant in its assault but no less real. It uses its militia proxies to undermine states and deny them authority throughout their territory, a process that has already given Tehran leverage over four Arab capitals -- Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa.

Compounding these two challenges are profound governance issues -- from political leadership to economic management, from social inequities to educational development. These could threaten even the most homogeneous states in the region, such as Egypt. A comprehensive U.S. strategy that addresses the external threats will give the United States greater leverage to focus effectively on these internal problems.

On ISIL, President Barack Obama has made clear that the challenge is more than a military one, although providing military support to governments fighting ISIL on the ground is critical. But military action is only one dimension; ISIL cannot be defeated unless it is also discredited. Only Muslims can undermine ISIL's fanatical ideology, and they must take the lead in doing so. Ultimately, U.S. strategy depends on inflicting setbacks on ISIL while building a broad coalition of partners in support of Arab-based efforts to defeat it. The loss of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar province, underscores the enormity and the urgency of this challenge.

Some see such a coalition as offering the possibility of bringing the Iranians and the Saudis together in their common enmity toward ISIL. Although the traditional view that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" might apply to Sunni readiness to cooperate covertly with Israel, it does not work for the Saudis, Emiratis, Bahrainis and others when it comes to the Iranians. They see their struggle against Iran in existential terms, and the more the Iranians seem to be intent on encircling Saudi Arabia, the more the Saudis and other Arabs will position themselves to counter Tehran. This objective is so fundamental to them that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others have now agreed to mobilize an Arab force -- not to fight Israel but to counter Iran-backed militias and, perhaps, jihadi forces.

We, too, have to judge the Iranians based on their behavior. Iran will surely fight to prevent ISIL's domination in Syria and Iraq, an arena in which our objectives converge and our operations may sometimes run in parallel. But while tactical points of convergence are possible, the Iranian strategic view of the region is fundamentally at odds with ours.

Perhaps this outlook could be different if economic integration with the outside world and internal aspirations cause Iran to alter its strategic objectives in the region. But we need to judge Iran on how it acts.

The most powerful elements in Iran today still see the United States as their enemy. This is not simply because of a conspiratorial mind-set about American determination to subvert the Islamic Republic, but also because they see America as the main impediment to their domination of the region. Even if the U.S. seeks to reassure them about its aims, they are highly unlikely to believe it unless the U.S. is prepared to acquiesce in their regional hegemony. The

combination of their interest in weakening the state structures of their Sunni adversaries and the belief of our traditional friends that they are locked in an existential conflict with Iran should give us pause about partnering with the Iranians and the Iran-backed Shiite militias in the fight against ISIL.

Ultimately, if the U.S. hopes to mobilize Sunni Arab populations of Iraq and Syria in opposition to ISIL -- an essential element to marginalizing it -- Iran cannot be seen as a presumed ally. That would pre-empt any serious Sunni effort to delegitimize ISIL, put the Sunni states on the defensive and, worst of all, increase the prospect that ISIL will present itself as the only real protector of the Sunnis.

To be sure, the Saudis have a history of playing a negative role in proselytizing the ideology of Sunni extremism. Today, however, they recognize they have a stake in combating its most radical elements. And unlike the Iranians, the Saudis also see the danger of undermining the state system in the Middle East.

While Iran cannot be a partner in discrediting ISIL, a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran, nonetheless, could make sense if it allows Iran a peaceful nuclear energy program but denies it the capability of becoming a nuclear weapons state. Every conflict that Iran touches today would be much more difficult and more dangerous in the future should Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability.

An agreement, however, would feed Saudi and other Arab concerns about the Iranian threat and require that the U.S. manage their reactions and invest in reassuring them. This needs to include pushing back on Iran throughout the region. Ironically, if the Iranian leadership sees that the U.S. will raise the cost of Iran's aggressive behaviors even while remaining open to opportunities, this may make cooperation with Iran on specific issues more likely; perhaps, over time, it will even alter Iran's political calculation.

Here, a change in American policy toward Syria is critical. The administration has understood that ISIL cannot have a safe haven in Syria if the U.S. is to be able, in time, to defeat it in Iraq. But the Assad regime is exploiting American attacks on ISIL and often carries out dramatically more bombing runs against its non-ISIL opposition than the U.S. conducts against ISIL.

To restore U.S. credibility and make it possible to build a more cohesive opposition that could change the balance of power on the ground, there needs to be a different kind of safe haven inside Syria -- one that would make it possible to house refugees inside the country and to allow a legitimate, credible opposition to become more politically and militarily relevant within the country.

The ultimate aim is to make a political settlement possible by showing that Assad cannot win. Assad's backers, especially Iran, will surely hate this and could choose to react. But the Iranians need to see that the U.S. will compete and that the costs for them will only go up without a political settlement.

With vanishing borders, a tangled web of transitory alliances and transnational groups -- both Sunni and Shiite -- operating outside the constraints of state power, the Middle East state system is under relentless pressure. A strategy to preserve it requires a long-term vision for shoring up U.S. allies, rolling back ISIL and countering the Iranians. The United States will not define the future for the region, but it has a distinct national interest in preventing the collapse of its state system.

*The authors recently collaborated on the Washington Institute report [Key Elements of a Strategy for the United States in the Middle East \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/key-elements-of-a-strategy-for-the-united-states-in-the-middle-east\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/key-elements-of-a-strategy-for-the-united-states-in-the-middle-east). ❖*

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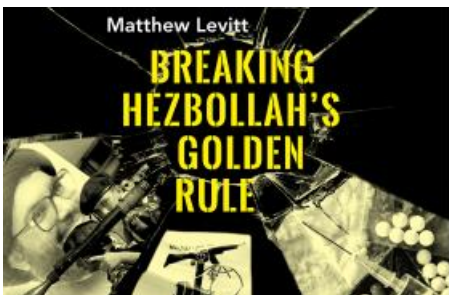
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