

Making Sense of Chaos in the Middle East

Multiple Wars, Multiple Alliances

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Apr 6, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/fhm-alfwdy-fy-alshrq-alawst-hrwb-mtdwdt-wthalfat-mtdwdt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/fhm-alfwdy-fy-alshrq-alawst-hrwb-mtdwdt-wthalfat-mtdwdt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Volcanic changes in the region are under way, with the outbreak of Sunni-Shiite wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, unprecedented tension between Washington and Israel, and U.S.-Iranian nuclear talks that appear on the verge of breakthrough. Watch an expert discussion of these challenges and the future of U.S. policy in the region.

On April 1, James Jeffrey, Dennis Ross, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. Ross is the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and former special assistant to President Obama. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; [Dr. Satloff's observations were published separately as PolicyWatch 2399 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/american-policy-toward-the-dual-threats-to-the-arab-state\).](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/american-policy-toward-the-dual-threats-to-the-arab-state)

JAMES JEFFREY

The Middle East is in a freefall. Recent events such as the joint Iraqi-U.S. liberation of Tikrit, the decision to release

military aid to Egypt, and U.S. support for the Gulf coalition in Yemen might have slowed the process, but it has not stopped. The current regional situation is at its worst since 1979.

Following World War II, the chaos in the Middle East was largely managed by the United States and its allies. But several key developments have begun to challenge the international order, primarily the events known as the "Arab Spring" and the surge of millennial Islamist movements, including the "Islamic State"/ISIS, al-Qaeda, and revolutionary Iran. The very fabric of the modern state is fraying across the region, as national loyalties are being challenged by local interests such as tribes, religion, and family. Despite the important role that the United States has played -- and should continue to play -- it cannot fix all of this.

But given the risks, and especially in light of increased Shiite-Sunni tensions, Washington must act. Traditionally, the United States has a number of guiding principles in dealing with such crises: namely, insisting on the legitimacy of nation-states, supporting friends and allies, maintaining readiness to use military force, and exhibiting policy consistency. The current administration, however, has favored a different set of guidelines, with its focus on reaching a transformational deal with Iran and maintaining pressure on terrorists while eschewing the use of wider use of military force and avoiding casualties.

To be sure, these priorities are mutually reinforcing, and the administration still enjoys public support on negotiating with Iran and avoiding a full-on military engagement with ISIS. Yet this approach has also produced great confusion among policymakers and analysts. Presidents have traditionally opted for one of two approaches in explaining U.S. policy during moments of crisis. The first, as adopted by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is to talk to the American people about what the White House is doing and explain U.S. goals. The second, represented by President George H. W. Bush, is acting without engaging the public. The current administration is following neither.

Regarding ISIS, the White House's stated goal of destroying rather than managing the group is the right one. Yet time is of the essence, and evolving regional dynamics mean that Washington has to act quickly. Current attempts to stem ISIS finances, combat violent extremism, and address the dangerous phenomenon of foreign fighters are all good complements to the core mission, but the group remains a pseudo-state with military capabilities that must be answered with military force.

The administration's decision to prioritize the ISIS fight in Iraq was correct, and its efforts there have been successful thus far. Iraq has a functioning government and developed armed forces (including the Kurdish Peshmerga and much of the national military), and Washington's understanding of the country is growing. The recent liberation of Tikrit is a major victory for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the U.S. Air Force, and a major setback for Iran and the various Shiite militias operating in Iraq. The inevitable fight for Mosul will be difficult, and problems of leadership and sectarianism will persist, but the United States has decades of experience dealing with these issues.

Syria, however, presents a far more challenging situation that feeds the administration's noninterventionist tendencies. In the White House's view, the brutal Assad regime is continuing its fight against groups that are often equally distasteful. Meanwhile, Turkey remains noncompliant, and Washington has no vision for the "day after" scenario in Syria. This is further complicated by the administration's determination not to provoke Iran, which views Damascus as a crucial proxy in the region. At the end of the day, these problems will be handed over to the next president. But the real question is: will other actors in the region wait until then?

DENNIS ROSS

Over the past quarter century, every U.S. administration has had to contend with at least one Middle East crisis. Today, an unprecedented array of crises has erupted around the region, any one of which would have posed a significant challenge to the United States on its own.

Most troublingly, the state system is under assault in the Middle East. And if these states fail, a variety of nonstate actors will fill the void. ISIS is not the sole reason for this collapse; Iran, too, is challenging its neighbors by using its Shiite proxies to create leverage. This has prompted a reaction from the Saudis and other Sunnis, who see themselves increasingly surrounded by Iranian influence. Unlike Israel, which is concerned with Iran's nuclear program first and its expansionism second, Arab states see the nuclear program as a symptom of Tehran's dangerous expansionist mindset. The Saudi decision to use force -- first in Bahrain, and now in Yemen -- is a signal that Riyadh is not going to wait any longer to address the threat, this time with a unified Arab force.

The United States has provided logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition and recently released military aid to Egypt, sending an important message to its allies. But if Washington gives any major signals that it views Iran as a partner against ISIS, it will lose Sunni allies. Saudi Arabia cannot afford to let ISIS portray itself as the protector of Sunnis around the world. In this regard, the administration's current policy of avoiding action against the Assad regime so as not to anger Iran has significant ramifications on its credibility as an ally.

As for the nuclear issue, the focus during President Obama's first term was on building pressure to make Iran transform its nuclear program into a wholly civil endeavor with peaceful intentions, in addition to empowering moderate factions in the Iranian regime. Yet the deal that seems to be emerging today has different objectives, as U.S. officials have concluded that negotiations will never yield a peaceful program. Rather, the current objective is to constrain the program, and the measure of success is a breakout time of one year -- a buffer the administration believes would provide sufficient time to respond if Tehran decides to flout the deal and pursue nuclear weapons. As a result of this shift, Iran will be allowed to keep much of its nuclear infrastructure.

Given these new objectives, two essential elements need to be addressed: verification and consequences. Regarding verification, the White House has to explain the technical aspects of its one-year breakout assessment. More important, any deal must give international monitors full access to all nuclear sites in Iran, official and unofficial. As for consequences, the deal should clearly lay out how the United States will respond if the agreement is violated. This is true for the sunset provision as well -- the administration must make clear that if Iran begins to rebuild a full-scale nuclear program after the deal expires, Washington will not preclude responding with military force.

America will not walk away from the Middle East any time soon. Future administrations should reassure regional allies that being a friend of the United States has advantages -- and that there are consequences to being its enemy.

This summary was prepared by Gavi Barnhard. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi
(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

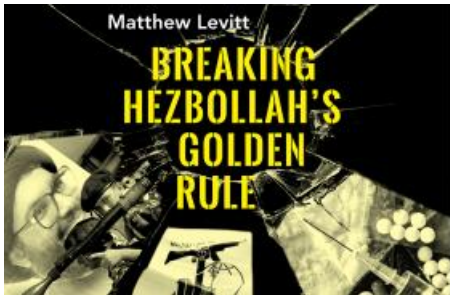


BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson
(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt
(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)