U.S. Policy Toward the Dual Threats to the Arab State

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

Apr 3, 2015
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/syast-alwlayat-almthdt-hyal-althdydat-almzdwjt-lldwlt-alrbyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Satloff (/experts/robert-satloff)
Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

Brief Analysis

With ISIS and Iran both threatening to upset the state system in the Middle East, Washington needs to adjust its approach accordingly.

The following is an edited version of a presentation delivered a Washington Institute Policy Forum on April 1, 2015, one day prior to the announcement of "key parameters" for an Iran nuclear agreement. Remarks by the forum's other speakers, James Jeffrey and Dennis Ross, ***were published as PolicyWatch 2400 (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/making-sense-of-chaos-in-the-middle-east-multiple-wars-multiple-alliances)*** *.*

Bloody and brutal intra-Arab and intra-Muslim warfare is not new in the Middle East -- to the contrary, it is a regrettable norm of the region. Indeed, a historical comparison shows that the total killed, on all sides, in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict -- about 125,000 -- is about as many as were killed in Yemen's civil war in the 1960s, the last time Egypt intervened there; half the number killed in the Syrian conflict since March 2011; and one-tenth killed in the Iran-Iraq War.

Despite this sad history, the current regional situation is unprecedented. It is not just the number, scope, or overlapping nature of conflicts; it is the fact that the target itself is the Arab state system -- a messy, unfair, bloody, often despotic state system but a system nonetheless.

There are two main sources of threat to the Arab order -- the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Iran. ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, wants to erase borders; Iran, the Islamic Republic, wants to create colonies. The threats are different, but the destruction befalling the state system is similar. And the threat is being felt almost everywhere -- from North Africa through the Levant and down to the Gulf.

America's Role, America's Absence

The United States should have a stake in this fight. The state system is one whose rules America largely set and a system in which it thrives. That has even been the case in the Middle East -- the region of the world most impervious to U.S. values but where America has actually done reasonably well over the last half-century in securing its other core interests. For all the problems of the Middle East, the United States has a powerful interest in the survival of this system.

The regional perception of America's withdrawal from the region only aggravates the local chaos and uncertainty. In Washington, the issue of American withdrawal is hotly debated; in the Middle East, however, the verdict is clear. Indeed, the region operates like a market -- it knows what it sees and it calculates accordingly.

Case in point, the events of the last two weeks: After Israel's rightist prime minister wins a convincing reelection after having declared that there will be no Palestinian state on his watch, Arab leaders forge the most potent military coalition since the 1967 war. But instead of marching on Jerusalem, they attack the Iran-backed Houthi forces in Yemen. Nothing could provide better clarity about priorities and motivations in the Middle East today.

Arab states, however, are not all of the same mind about the nature of the threat. This was evidenced, for example, by the contest of wills between Egypt's president, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, and Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal during the Arab Summit last month in Cairo. They had a public spat over a letter written to the summit by Russian president Vladimir Putin and the role that Russia could play in helping stabilize the Middle East. But their dispute was not really about Russia but rather about the best way to rescue the embattled "Arab state." Sisi would swallow Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Iranian warts and all, for fear that the alternative is ISIS; the Saudis see Iran's hand behind Assad, just as they see Iran behind the Houthis, and reject any suggestion of trucking with Assad. At the core, however, they both know that the State -- perhaps their State -- is in trouble.

Going back to the Arab Joint Defense Pact of 1950, Arabs have discussed the idea of military coalitions for more than a half-century; most of this has been empty talk. But given the gravity of the situation facing states across the region, they might just be fearful enough to act. Recent months have already seen more long-range Arab military action -- United Arab Emirates air force operations in Libya, Egyptian navy operations in the southern Red Sea -- than in recent memory. Capabilities, of course, are a limitation, which is why it is more likely that Arab states act on the periphery -- as in Yemen, perhaps in Libya -- than in the Arab heartland of Syria and Iraq. But even there, one should not rule it out.

A Policy of "Dual Frenemies"?

Some in Washington may view the idea of Arabs acting for themselves with a sense of rueful satisfaction. This, the argument goes, is a great achievement for the United States, which can stay offshore and limit its exposure. And if, in the process of diplomacy, the United States is able to maneuver the region into a balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites -- not a "twin pillar" policy or "dual containment" policy but a policy of "dual frenemies," with Washington's Arab former allies turned antagonists and its Iranian former antagonists turned allies while America serves as the critical balancer -- then all the better.

Sadly, this analysis is delusional. Last month’s hasty, forced withdrawal of U.S. special operators from Yemen and the loss of the air base there cannot be viewed as the prelude to a new success, the successful application of strategic balancing. Nor can the application of Iranian military power in Iraq. Nor can a false assessment of Assad's staying power in Syria.

The Israel Angle

With conflicts on so many fronts, it is noteworthy that the administration focused so much of its energy over the last two weeks on pushing back against Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's reelection. There is no

doubt that, in the campaign's final lap, Netanyahu gave the administration powerful ammunition with statements that he will, first and foremost, have to answer for in the court of Israeli public opinion. But with Arab voter participation rising to unprecedented levels, Arab Knesset representation rising to unprecedented levels, and more Israelis going to the polls than in more than fifteen years -- at a rate about 20 percent higher than the U.S. rate for eligible voters -- it is remarkable that the administration could call into doubt the health of Israeli democracy. Historically, Washington disagrees with some of Israel's policies -- a reality that has been the norm of the relationship for sixty-plus years -- but has never questioned its democracy.

In terms of Netanyahu's statement about the peace process, one can legitimately debate whether he was making an analytical statement or a prescriptive statement, but it is difficult to dispute that he was referring to the current situation, not forswearing the potential for change in the future. In any case, his remark was in the heat of the campaign and he went out of his way to clarify it in the days thereafter.

One would think President Obama would have more understanding for incumbents who make last-minute statements designed to appeal to certain constituencies. As he himself said in the final 2012 presidential debate, when asked about the elements of a future agreement on Iran's nuclear program: "Our goal is to get Iran to recognize it needs to give up its nuclear program and abide by the UN resolutions that have been in place...We hope that their leadership takes the right decision, but the deal we'll accept is they end their nuclear program. It's very straightforward."

It was not long before U.S. negotiators characterized the president's own position as "maximalist" and "unattainable," and advocates of the president's 2012 position are today characterized by the White House as warmongers.

The key point here is not to critique Iran policy but to assert that something deeper must be at the heart of the administration's pushback against Netanyahu. When the prime minister clarified his remarks, the administration could have said, "Thanks for the clarification, we now look forward to policies that reflect this renewed commitment to the two-state solution." Instead, it said it still didn't trust Netanyahu and that it was considering alternative diplomatic formulas, including a UN Security Council resolution, to advance its case.

Is the goal to extract a price from Israel for its opposition to key aspects of the administration's foreign policy? Is it to limit Israel's ability to affect the domestic U.S. debate over the Iran deal? Is it, despite the president's protestations, personal pique? Psychoanalyzing this is not productive. All that one knows is that purposeful distancing from Israel only adds to the commonly held perception in the region that America's allies are on their own.

"Stay in Touch"

Of course, the skeletal structure of U.S.-Middle East relationships remains intact -- the military aid, intelligence cooperation, and so on. That remains true of U.S.-Israel relations, U.S.-Egypt relations, and others. But the flesh and blood of these relationships -- what makes these relationships partnerships and not business transactions -- is slipping away.

A sign of this can be found in the final sentence of the readout of President Obama's phone call to Egypt's President Sisi, informing him about lifting the hold on arms deliveries. The statement read: "The two leaders agreed to stay in touch in the weeks and months ahead." It did not say "they will remain in close contact," nor did it say "they will coordinate through their personal representatives to discuss common strategic concerns." Rather, it said simply that they would "stay in touch." Just four days after the anniversary of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, in a phone call that was supposed to turn a new page in the U.S. relationship with the Arab leader who is driving the inter-Arab call for a new regional military coalition, all the United States could muster was a promise to "stay in touch." Those three

words speak volumes.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

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)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)