A Moving Target: The Art and Science of Middle East Policy Planning

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Brief Analysis

Three distinguished scholars and former U.S. officials discuss how the Policy Planning Staff in the State and Defense Departments can draw on past lessons to address regional problems in Syria, Iran, and elsewhere.

On September 29, 2014, Paul Wolfowitz, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, and Dennis Ross addressed a ***special Washington Institute symposium honoring the life and legacy of the late Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/2014-samuel-w.-lewis-memorial-symposium)*** *. Wolfowitz is a scholar with the American Enterprise Institute and a former deputy secretary of defense. Matthews is president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Ross is The Washington Institute's counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. Video and summaries of the rest of the symposium are also available, featuring* ***remarks by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/keynote-address-samuel-w.-lewis-memorial-symposium)*** *as well as Ambassador Dan Shapiro, Justice Elyakim Rubinstein, and Ambassador William A. Brown* ***(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-evolution-of-u.s.-israel-relations-in-the-sam-lewis-era)*** *.*

PAUL WOLFOWITZ

Ambassador Lewis was a great man who did great work. He was an ambassador to Israel -- he never made the mistake of becoming an ambassador from Israel. He was a voice of calm and balance.

He also worked in a region that regularly reminds us of the considerable challenges inherent in policy planning. One of the more important lessons learned about that process over the years is that it works only if conducted by a small, relatively secretive group with direct access to the most senior policymakers. In his memoir, Secretary of State Dean Acheson described how President Truman summoned him to the White House one day, told him the United States had developed a hydrogen bomb, and asked him to develop a strategy for American foreign policy in light of that revelation. Acheson realized that a specific kind of staff was needed to discuss sensitive issues of that sort: namely, one whose small size and proximity to the very top of the policy chain would ensure that its prescriptions were both heard and trusted.

This lesson was borne out years later when the Pentagon was discussing the liberation of Kuwait. At the time, the Defense Department's tightly knit Policy Planning Staff wondered whether it would be possible to go around Kuwait from the western side instead of a run-up-the-middle plan. They were able to discuss the idea in secret and present it directly to Secretary Dick Cheney, who liked it and asked the military to look into it. Coming from him, the request was taken seriously and wound up shaping the battle plan. Yet if the civilian staff's idea had been presented by anyone lower on the chain -- even at the undersecretary level -- the military would no doubt have dismissed it.

Today, as the United States enters a three-sided war with the Islamic State/ISIS and the Assad regime, policy planners need two critical things: the best intelligence possible, and the views of friends and partners in the region as solicited via frank diplomatic conversations. Accordingly, the secretary of state should form a high-level, qualified policy advisory group, perhaps run by the head of policy planning. This small group can dig into issues in an open-minded, fundamental way, and it should be able to talk to the secretary without leaks to the press.

Middle East policy planning also necessitates identifying moderates in the region, which can be difficult. Israel has often proven to be the only reliable U.S. ally there, but the close bilateral relationship has led some to hold the United States responsible for Israel's actions. There needs to be a way to foster a better understanding and more restraint.

As for Arab partners, U.S. officials should understand that while sectarian strife remains a major problem in the region, it usually does not trump the core interests of the countries in question. For example, during Secretary of State James Baker's 1991 visit to the Middle East, he met with Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to discuss Iraq and other issues. There, the head of the kingdom's Sunni royal family declared that leaving Saddam Hussein's largely Sunni government in power would be a mistake, and that Iraqi Shiites must be supported in their rebellion against Baghdad. Although the Saudis were, and remain, a key player in the region's sectarian game, they saw Saddam as the greatest threat and shaped their policy accordingly. Their advice was ignored at the time, but that should not stop Washington from encouraging them to develop influence in Baghdad today as a counterweight to Iran's influence.

Overall, the prospects for useful American influence in the region vary. In Libya, more could have been done to help create effective security forces. In Syria, it will take generations to recover from divisions created by the ongoing violence. And the ascendance of ISIS should not have been so surprising, since there was ample evidence of growing extremism in the Syrian opposition and weakness in the Iraqi army. Tunisia, however, appears hopeful, and it needs U.S. and European support as much as possible.

JESSICA TUCHMAN MATHEWS

Ambassador Lewis was a man of deep wisdom. He had an overflowing common sense and sense of humor -- a rare combination and one to be admired.

When looking at policymaking, one must consider how engaged the American public is prepared to be in the Middle East. Although the United States is weary of interventions that do not succeed, the recent ISIS beheadings spurred a massive shift in public opinion. There is now more willingness to stay engaged if Washington can provide convincing clarity of action. At the same time, the United States has spent more in real dollars on the Afghanistan intervention

than it spent on the Marshall Plan after World War II, and the public has at least a general sense of the gap between these costs and what there is to show for them.

Another key issue in policymaking is strategic patience, which Washington has been too short of lately in the Middle East. At least some of the blame for this problem lies in the phrase "Arab Spring," which created unrealistic expectations that conditions in the region would quickly change for the better. Undoing that impression among policy planners is therefore important.

U.S. diplomacy also needs a better listening ear in the region. In particular, we need more people whose principal expertise is the Arab world as opposed to the narrower Arab-Israeli conflict.

As for how Washington should approach specific hotspots going forward, the scope and nature of the ISIS threat has shifted reality deeply enough to make previously farfetched scenarios seem possible. In Syria, for example, one can now imagine the Assad regime and the moderate Syrian opposition considering ceasefires that would allow them to focus on this mutual threat, which has left both of them bloodied in recent months. A similar change in priorities already appears to hold for Saudi Arabia and Iran, two countries that fear and distrust each other but also recognize that they now face a common existential threat.

Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, the United States must not lose the opportunity of an acceptable deal with Tehran, even if it involves the difficult task of reexamining core assumptions. Such a deal would not make Washington and Iran friends, but it would give greater domestic credibility to the Rouhani government, which is under domestic pressure to deliver. Rouhani's ability to interact with the Saudis will be greater if Tehran can deliver an Iran deal, and substantially less if it cannot.

DENNIS ROSS

Ambassador Lewis asked many hard questions that often made people question their own assumptions. The essence of policy planning is maintaining consistency between day-to-day decisions and long-term outlook, and this requires clear goals. Toward that end, Sam Lewis challenged people to test their ideas and urged them to focus on courses of action that would create change over time. He also embodied the importance of values in diplomacy.

In deciding who the United States should work with today, one must look at the regional landscape. There are extremists on both sides of the Sunni-Shiite spectrum who do not respect the ideas of civil authority, individual states, or pluralism. Another dilemma lies in dealing with authoritarian governments, some of which threaten American values and interests, and others that challenge U.S. values but share similar interests. Those countries that are committed to establishing order should be strengthened.

To foster greater pluralism in the Middle East over time, the first step is to deal with those who will not accept it under any circumstances. Security and order are a baseline for pluralism.

Regarding Syria, the issues there are much more complicated than in Iraq, where the strategy has become clear. Bashar al-Assad seems to be exploiting the international focus on ISIS as an opportunity to further intensify his campaign against the wider opposition, in keeping with his pattern of attacking mostly non-ISIS rebels throughout the conflict. In response, the United States must refrain from getting caught between solving the problem and doing nothing. Doing nothing in the region leads to vacuums that can be filled by even worse elements.

Regarding the Arab-Israeli issue, every U.S. administration has assumed to one degree or another that resolving it would change the region. Today, this assumption does not apply. The current state of the Middle East is calling into question many assumptions long embedded in the national security establishment. Going forward, the focus should be on coordinated unilateralism, with the United States brokering between Israel and the Palestinians as needed.

As for Iran, policy planners naturally focus on how strategic surprises can go wrong and what the consequences

might look like, but they must also anticipate how things can go right. Although the Obama administration has been pessimistic about a nuclear deal in public, it should still be thinking about potential positive outcomes and alternatives.

This summary was prepared by Marina Shalabi. The Samuel W. Lewis Memorial Symposium was supported by the Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship. ❖

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