

We Need a Middle East Strategy, Not Just an Anti-IS Strategy

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Sep 10, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

In Washington, foreign policy crises are covered as breaking news, but in reality, they develop over years and require just as long to resolve.

When President Obama addresses the nation tonight, much attention will focus on whether he plans to expand airstrikes against the self-styled Islamic State (IS) from Iraq into Syria. The resulting commentary will focus on whether doing so is right or wrong. But military force is a tactic, and its utility and wisdom can only be judged with respect to clear objectives and a strategy for achieving them.

The chaos and confusion of the past three years -- both in the Middle East and in Washington's approach to it -- demand not just an anti-IS strategy, but a new strategy for the region broadly. It is on this, and not just air strikes, that President Obama should focus his remarks.

As I [wrote recently \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-triple-threat\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-triple-threat), IS represents three distinct threats, each of which requires confronting the group, but none of which will disappear upon its demise. Of these, the one that we have most struggled to address is instability in the Middle East, and the resulting challenge to our interests there.

For decades, American objectives in the Middle East were to ensure regional stability and prevent encroachment by any would-be external hegemon. With the end of the Cold War, Washington worried less about outside powers, and increasingly about the region's economic and political development -- which, as the Arab uprisings of 2011 demonstrated, are vital to stability.

Our strategy for advancing these goals focused heavily on strong bilateral alliances, generous bilateral military and economic assistance, a robust military presence, occasional armed intervention, and active diplomacy aimed at resolving the region's conflicts.

But in recent years new obstacles from within the region and the United States complicated that strategy. Old allies were swept away, tensions arose with remaining allies over how to deal with the forces that supplanted them, and

the region's conflicts multiplied rather than dwindled. At the same time, seized by war-weariness, economic pressures, and hopes of energy independence and strategic rebalancing, the United States backed away from the region rather than devising a new strategy for it.

The fruits of this disengagement are now vividly apparent: conflicts we hoped to avoid, such as the Syrian civil war and Iraq's sectarian squabbling, have drawn us in not because we wish to be involved, but because the threats they pose to our interests demand it. These interests cannot be ignored, however much we may wish to focus on domestic issues or pivot to Asia; indeed, our interests in that continent are intertwined with events in the Middle East, as allies such as Japan and Taiwan depend vitally on Arab oil exports even if we no longer do.

What is needed is not merely an anti-IS strategy. Even if we were to defeat the group as envisioned by U.S. officials, we would still have to contend with a Syrian conflict that has killed 200,000 people and an Iraq being pulled apart by centrifugal sectarian forces, not to mention Iran's nuclear ambitions and other challenges. What is required is a strategy to rebuild a U.S.-led security architecture, centered on strengthening bonds with allies, building up national and regional institutions, promoting economic reform and development so that those allies can shoulder more of their own security burden, and tackling threats before they metastasize.

Ironically, it has taken new chaos in Iraq to pull us out of our post-Iraq war aversion to engagement in the Middle East. In outlining what the next phase of U.S. policy there will look like, President Obama must make clear that urgent action, while necessary, will not mean immediate results. In Washington, foreign policy crises are covered as breaking news, but in reality, they develop over years and require just as long to resolve. Because American interests in the Middle East demand action and engagement, alongside patience and constancy, President Obama must outline a strategy built for the long haul.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



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)

TOPICS

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