



# **KEY ELEMENTS OF A STRATEGY FOR THE UNITED STATES IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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# Key Elements of a Strategy for the United States in the Middle East

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**T**he Middle East today is consumed by multiple conflicts. While some see a broad struggle between Sunnis and Shiites driving these conflicts, others see sectarian, tribal, and clannish differences taking center stage and producing an inevitable collapse of the Sykes-Picot colonial map imposed nearly one hundred years ago. A struggle over basic identity is likely to plague the region for at least the coming decade and is threatening the state system that we have known in the Middle East.

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THE ISLAMIC STATE of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as ISIL or the Islamic State, embodies the most obvious and direct threat to that system, particularly with its declaration of a caliphate designed to replace existing states. Iran, however, also constitutes a threat. It may not be so overt in its assault, but its threat is no less real. It uses its militia proxies to undermine states and deny them authority throughout their territory, giving Iran leverage over Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana.

Compounding the challenges of identity are the profound governance issues—from political leadership to economic management, from social inequities to educational development—that could threaten even the most homogeneous states in the region, such as Egypt. A collapse of the state system in the Middle East—or a proliferation of failing or failed states—fueled by millennial religious visions is bound to put our interests at risk in the region. Those interests, repeatedly cited by President Obama, include stopping terrorism, preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, preserving the free flow of energy, and supporting U.S. allies. Over time, it is clearly also in our interest to see governments in the

region strengthened as they move toward inclusion and social progress. One thing is certain: the weaker states in the Middle East become, the easier it will be for terrorist groups and terrorist-supporting states to plan, recruit, and operate. Should this weakening trend continue, we will inevitably be forced to contend with plots against not just our friends but also against the American homeland.

ISIS has now embedded itself in a wide swath of territory in Syria and Iraq, and President Obama has rightly declared this a threat to the United States. He has stated that our aim is to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS. And he has now sought new authorization from Congress to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, the president has correctly made clear that the challenge is more than a military one, although providing military support to governments fighting ISIS on the ground will be important: ISIS cannot be defeated unless it is also discredited. Only Muslims can undermine ISIS’s fanatical ideology, and they must take the lead in doing so. In addition, systematic efforts will be required on an ongoing basis to cut off the flow of foreign recruits and the group’s outside sources

of money. Ultimately, the strategy for achieving the goals the president has outlined depends on having a broad coalition of partners in support of Arab-based efforts to defeat ISIS.

Some see such a coalition offering the possibility of bringing the Iranians and the Saudis together in their common enmity toward ISIS. Although the traditional view that the enemy of my enemy is my friend might apply to the 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—with perceived threats to its Eastern Province, as well as to Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—the more the Saudis will position themselves to counter the Islamic Republic. A new king in Saudi Arabia will not alter this reality. Indeed, the Saudi-led coalition to militarily counter the Houthi efforts to take over all of Yemen reflects the collective view of Arab leaders that they must draw their own redline against Iranian expansion in the region. 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 fight Iran-backed militias and, perhaps also, jihadist forces.

In this vein, we, too, have to judge the Iranians based on their behavior. They will surely fight to prevent ISIS's domination in both Syria and Iraq. And here our objectives unmistakably 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. The most powerful elements in Iran today—especially Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—see the United States as their enemy not simply because of a conspiratorial mindset about our determination to subvert the Islamic Republic, but also because they see us as the main impediment to the achievement of their “rightful” domination of the region. Even if we seek to reassure them about our aims, they are highly unlikely to believe it unless we are 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 in the fight against ISIS.

Ultimately, if we hope to mobilize Sunni Arab populations of Iraq and Syria in opposition to ISIS—an essential element to marginalizing it—Iran cannot be a putative ally. The appearance of partnership will preempt any serious Sunni effort to delegitimize ISIS; worse, we will increase the prospect that ISIS will be able to present itself as the only real protector of the Sunnis, ready to fight against those determined to subjugate and oppress their Sunni brothers. Nothing is more certain to put Sunni states on the defensive.

To be sure, the Saudis themselves have done much to contribute to Islamic extremist ideology in the region and outside it. Historically, no one has done more globally to fund extremist, intolerant Islamist teachings than Saudi Arabia. And the Saudis (and Qataris) were also far too quick to materially support radical Sunni Islamists fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria without regard for the consequences of doing so. In the last few years, however, the Saudi leadership has become much more sober about its regional responsibilities and the need to counter radical Sunni and Shiite ideologies. Within Saudi Arabia, its leaders have begun to rein in religious authorities, alter traditional Wahhabi teachings, and favor more moderate clergy for top state positions. In addition, much greater control is being exercised on providing funding to those who could end up threatening Saudi Arabia and radicalizing the region.

In other words, while the Saudis have contributed to the ideology that drives ISIS, they now recognize they have a stake in combatting it. Unlike the Iranians, the Saudis also see the danger of undermining the state-system in the Middle East. But their behavior in Yemen now also indicates that they are likely to see the threats orchestrated by Iran as their first priority and not ISIS. A nuclear agreement with Iran won't lessen their perception of the threat, and clearly will require us to manage their reactions and reassure them and other Sunnis about how we see the region and our interests in it. A strategy that preserves the state system in the Middle East, counters ISIS and rolls it back, reassures key Sunni leaders (even as we try to move them to become more inclusive and tolerant in governing), and counters the Iranians, will require a vision of how we want to move the region. Put simply, it requires a vision

in which we aim to weaken the radical Islamists—whether Sunni or Shia.

### Shaping a Strategy in the Middle East

In shaping a strategy for the Middle East, several key elements should guide us:

- Focus on what we must do to strengthen the state system in the Middle East. In strategic terms, the critical “center of balance” in the entire set of regional conflicts is ultimately the state system. This inevitably means working with our traditional partners in the region—meaning Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. (North Africa, where Morocco is our traditional partner, is outside this discussion.) This does not mean sacrificing our values or withholding our legitimate criticisms, but it does mean in a country like Egypt, where our stake in a stable government is aligned with our deeper strategic needs in the region, our first priority in the near term is not influencing Egypt’s governance. To be sure, it is essential that all these states, including Egypt, become more inclusive, more tolerant, more accepting of pluralism, and more willing to respect minority rights.
- Concentrate on inflicting setbacks on ISIS. For a group that claims to have divine backing, it needs to expand and be seen as scoring victories. Defeats and losses of territory will reduce its appeal and begin to highlight its contradictions. (We need to be smarter in public diplomacy as well—disseminating pictures of ISIS forces surrendering will do much to vitiate their image of being divine messengers on a divine mission.) But producing defeats and overt signs of surrender may require a greater tempo of attacks. U.S. ground forces are not the answer. The alternative is a U.S. air campaign along with local Arab ground forces, with the assistance and support of enhanced numbers of U.S. advisors and Special Forces personnel, as recommended by military advisors. (Note the specifics in the discussion on Iraq to follow.)
- Don’t lose sight of the objective in Syria. The anti-ISIS, anti-Assad forces must be strengthened and not alienated by attacks that give the Assad regime a free hand to go after the non-ISIS Syrian opposition groups. Such an inherently contradictory posture will undermine our aims against ISIS.

- Transactions with Iran are acceptable when they leave us better off or lessen a potential threat. In this connection, a comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran makes sense if it allows Iran a peaceful nuclear energy program but denies it the capability of becoming a nuclear weapons state. Ironically, transactions with Iran may become more likely if the Iranian leadership sees that we will raise the costs of their aggressive behaviors in the region even as we remain open to leaving them a way out. Syria could be a case in point.
- Manage relations with Turkey, given its role in our approach to ISIS, Iran, Syria, and vis-à-vis the state system in the region. “Management” is the watchword here because Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood is a profound problem. Constant attention to promoting our converging interests, while conveying the real costs of postures that put Turkey at odds with its neighbors, will require a deft hand.
- Develop with the Europeans, Japanese, and Arab Gulf states plans for reconstruction, development, and stabilization for areas in Iraq and Syria following the rollback of ISIS. A complicating factor—but a principle that needs to remain at the core of U.S. policy—is that the Assad regime is not a partner for this process. In the interim, the United States needs to invest even more to meet the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

### Practical Implications of the General Guidelines for Action

The administration is right to have a first-things-first approach toward Iraq. But its objectives should be clearer. As with all the parts of the strategy, the president’s national security team should, at least in-house, spell out what it seeks to achieve by January 2017 and decide what will be necessary to be successful. For example, goals for Iraq should include:

- Bolster the Sunni tribes, perhaps through the national guard mechanism, to make them willing and able to fight ISIS.
- Recapture key cities, including Mosul.
- Ensure no threat to Baghdad.

- Meet a meaningful metric on standing up effective Iraqi security forces, including specifically counter-terrorism and special operations forces.
- Diminish the Shiite militias.
- Expand oil production and investment and secure a permanent oil deal between the Iraqi central government and the Kurds.
- Enhance support from its Arab and Turkish neighbors.

This may seem a daunting list, but if we are serious about rolling back ISIS, it represents what we should be aiming to achieve. Clearly, it is likely to require more than we are doing now, particularly because we cannot be in a position where carrying out airstrikes in one area means we are unable to carry them out in another. It may well require not only more and additional types of strike platforms but also embedding U.S. Special Forces with Iraqi forces to the battalion level and partnering with the Sunni tribes. To be sure, it will not be easy to reduce the weight of the Shiite militias, especially given Iran's likely response. But investing in building the Iraqi security forces is the key, and the Iranians' interest in seeing ISIS rolled back may temper their readiness to impede this goal. (This may also apply to Iran's reaction to our doing more in Syria, particularly if we communicate clearly our aim in Syria.) The bottom line is: a first-things-first approach means putting the emphasis on an adequately resourced strategy for Iraq.

## SYRIA

No strategy in Iraq can succeed without a serious approach to Syria. The administration has clearly understood that ISIS cannot have a safe haven in Syria if we are to be able, in time, to defeat it in Iraq. But Assad is exploiting our attacks against ISIS, oftentimes carrying out dramatically more bombing runs against the non-ISIS opposition than we conduct against ISIS. The very groups we seek to ultimately replace ISIS are being alienated—or, worse, decimated—in a self-defeating posture. The announced plans to expand training are yet to begin, while the refugee crisis is reaching ever more alarming proportions. To restore our credibility and make it possible to build a more cohesive opposition that actually could change the balance of power on the ground, there needs to be a safe haven—one that makes it possible to house refugees in Syria and that allows a legitimate, credible opposition to become more politically and militarily

relevant from within Syria. Because a safe haven has been a demand of the Erdogan government, we should, in turn, insist not just that Turkey allow our use of Incirlik Air Base, but that the Turks also provide forces to help secure the buffer area and prevent any effort by ISIS to infiltrate the area. Similarly, since this buffer will create an environment in which the Syrian opposition groups can more safely coalesce, the Saudis, Emiratis, and Kuwaitis—and maybe the Qataris—should finance the housing and infrastructure for refugees there while also meeting the costs of military training of opposition forces in the zone. The aim is to make a political settlement possible by showing that Assad cannot win. The Iranians and the Russians will surely hate this—and could choose to react. But the Iranians and the Russians need to see we will compete and that the costs for them will go up—not down—without a political settlement.

In this regard, we need to be clear with the Russians and the Iranians that our purpose in creating a buffer is to fight ISIS without permitting Assad to strengthen his position and add to the refugee flow. The problem with doing this publicly is that it puts Moscow and Tehran on the spot and almost obliges them to up the ante and respond. Thus, an effort should be made at least initially to do this quietly—informing the Russians, Iranians, and Assad that we are running operations in northern Syria, to include the area from the west over Aleppo to the eastern border, and that Syria will lose any airplane that flies in this area and/or any air-defense radar that is turned on. If Scud missiles are fired against refugees concentrating in this area, these Scuds will be targeted. Our aim with the Russians and the Iranians is to make clear that we are serious; that we are building the opposition to make a political settlement possible—and that it is time for them to recognize that Assad will not be part of it. Additionally, we should tell them we are not trying to put a client state in place in Syria; rather, we are trying to create the basis for a political settlement in which Assad is gone, a broad national dialogue becomes possible, and all groups, including minorities, can be secure.

## IRAN

Henry Kissinger has said about Iran that it has to decide if it is “a cause or a country.” The former will continue to limit what we can do with it; the latter could lead to greater potential for remaking the relationship. Iran's size and the character of its population make it

a regional power. The revolutionary ideology of the Supreme Leader makes it a danger. But that ideology is also not embraced by the Iranian public even if it is one that Ali Khamenei seeks to preserve and safeguard. Will it survive his rule? Perhaps, but the challenge for us is to position ourselves in a way that makes it possible to do business with Iran if it is ready to shift course while continuing to demonstrate the high costs to Iran of unacceptable behaviors. Tactical adjustments have been the rule of thumb for the Islamic Republic as preserving the regime has been its (and certainly Khamenei's) most important priority. That is why showing we are ready to raise the costs to the Iranians in Syria, and in the region, is so important for trying to affect Iran's policy. The desire to empower a pragmatic constituency in Iran is understandable but has little chance of success so long as Qassem Soleimani and the IRGC Qods Force seem to be successful in expanding Iranian influence in the region.

The framework agreement reached by the P5+1 on April 2 can provide the basis of an effective control regime. But many critical pieces need to be put in place before the end of June for the regime to be effective. The framework provides for unrestricted access to all declared and undeclared facilities, but the mechanisms to ensure such access need to be negotiated. Furthermore, Iran must know the consequences in the event it blocks access or violates the agreement in other ways, and that the more egregious the violation, the greater the certainty of consequence and cost to them. Given the industrial-size nuclear program Iran will be permitted after fifteen years, it is essential for the Obama administration to stress that nuclear weapons will not be permitted even after the deal expires and that the United States will take all necessary means to ensure this.

Congress can play an essential role in this connection. Indeed, the administration should consult with Congress on the range of possible violations and the consequences for each. For its part, Congress should spell out the consequences if Iran violates the agreement, with preauthorization of the use of force in the event Iran moves toward breakout. Finally, any deal must be accompanied by tangible measures—U.S. military presence, arms sales, additional security cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council—to reassure our regional friends that we will not abandon them or

acquiesce in Iranian regional hegemony. The key with Iran's leaders is to communicate clearly to them, not because they will necessarily accept what we convey, but because they will seek to exploit any openings they see. We need them to see the costs of doing so.

## RUSSIA

President Vladimir Putin has demonstrated in the Iran negotiations that he will follow Russia's interests and not reflexively oppose us simply to undercut the United States. ISIS, with its Chechen participants, represents a threat to Russia. We should be very clear with Putin—and this requires direct discussions with him—about what we are doing and why. In Syria, we won't live with Assad, but the aim is to create a real political transition and settlement and Russia can and should be part of shaping that. That requires convincing Putin he faces stalemate and eventual defeat, not gradual success. With ISIS, the aim is to defeat the group; that is not possible without the Sunnis, and resisting Assad as well as ISIS is necessary to get them to play a serious role. The channel to Putin must be authoritative and transactional: we will cooperate where our interests intersect and oppose actions that violate international norms. With Putin now feeling increasing economic pressures, we should make it clear that we are not out to weaken or humiliate Russia but will respond to challenges (whether in Ukraine or Syria) even as we are prepared to cooperate where our interests converge.

## THE GULF STATES

Creating a safe haven in Syria will restore not just our credibility with the Saudis et al., but also our leverage. They will see we are prepared to resist Iran's regional ambitions, and that will allow us to press them to do more—more monies for the Sunni tribes, better coordination on what should be given and done for the Syrian opposition we seek to have coalesce, more efforts to discredit ISIS, more help for Syrian refugees, and so on. It will also help us manage their response to a possible nuclear deal with Iran—and convince them this is not part of a U.S. effort to treat Iran as our regional partner. Obviously, the administration's provision of intelligence and logistical—and perhaps planning—support to the Saudi-led coalition on Yemen should diminish their view that we are reluctant to counter Iranian moves in the area. Similarly, a more consistent posture

toward Egypt will also help us convince them we are about resisting Iran and not fixated only on ISIS—factors that will make it possible for us to ask them to do more, including with us to get Egypt to follow smarter policies, at least economically.

## EGYPT

No strategy designed to bolster the state system in the Middle East is possible without a functioning U.S.-Egypt relationship. While not sufficient, little is possible if we do not repair the relationship. Military-to-military ties must remain a pillar of our relationship, particularly if we want to regain any capacity to influence Egyptian behavior. The administration's restoration of military assistance was the right step toward rebuilding a fractured relationship—one that was increasingly defined by a defiant attitude toward the United States. We need not hold back criticism of Egyptian domestic behaviors that we see as wrongheaded and counterproductive, but such positions will be more effective in the context of an ongoing U.S.-Egypt relationship. There is no state system in the Middle East without Egypt, and we do not want Egypt to pursue self-defeating policies domestically. We need to use the Gulf states' influence to affect Egypt's economic policies. And we must develop a high-level channel to President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to discuss our concerns about the consequences of behaviors such as cutting off civil society, arresting non-Islamists, and leaving no outlets for political activity or the expression of grievances. Beyond the continued provision of assistance, deepening the security partnership includes working cooperatively with Egypt on the main sources of threat it faces, from ISIS-affiliated extremists in Sinai and in Libya.

## JORDAN

Jordan is a buffer—for both Israel and the Gulf states—from ISIS. The Gulf states can and must do more to shore up Jordan financially—both to enhance its stability and to help it manage its refugee problem. The brutal killing of Lt. Muath al-Kasabeh, the Jordanian pilot, who was burned alive by ISIS, has produced a backlash in Jordan, particularly among key tribes. And that has undoubtedly strengthened King Abdullah's position in combating ISIS. But we should not ignore some of the earlier signs of disaffection within the country that fed support for ISIS, and we should work with the king

to find ways of addressing Jordan's challenges. In addition, Jordanian concerns should be taken into account in any effort to set up a southern safe haven in Syria, since this might attract precisely the sort of refugee flow or influx of ISIS fighters that would make matters worse for the Jordanians. And just as Washington should be a firm ally in supporting Jordan's willingness to take the fight directly to ISIS, the U.S. should also buffer Amman from demands that its ground forces take the fight to ISIS on behalf of other Arab states.

## ISRAEL

Israel is not an indifferent observer to the current struggles in the region. In southern Syria opposite the Golan Heights, both the IRGC-Hezbollah and global jihadists are on its border. In Sinai, Egypt is confronting ISIS-affiliated groups that on occasion have launched missiles against Israel. And, in Jordan, potential ISIS threats against the regime are taken seriously by the Israelis. Similarly, the civil war now being waged in Yemen can affect Israel if the Houthis and Iran become able to disrupt shipping through the Bab al-Mandab Strait—obviously a threat that Egypt and Saudi Arabia seem determined to prevent. Israel has much to offer the Egyptians, Jordanians, and the other Sunni states confronting Iran and its proxies. Already, it provides intelligence and some logistical support to both Egypt and Jordan quietly.

However, notwithstanding a convergence of strategic interests—especially on Iran—none of the Arab states will openly cooperate with Israel so long as there remains a complete stalemate on the Palestinian issue. Could the potential value of Israeli assistance move the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Saudis to be active on the Palestinian issue, perhaps creating an umbrella for the Israelis and Palestinians? While unlikely, it might be worth testing quietly what they might be prepared to do.

The new Israeli government could well have an incentive to test the possibilities, not simply because of the common threats in the region but also as a way of mending fences with the Obama administration. Indeed, Israel has many reasons to shore up U.S. support, including to help blunt the global campaign to delegitimize Israel, especially powerful in Europe.

In the aftermath of the Israeli prime minister's appearance before Congress and his dramatic criticism of the president's negotiations with Iran, and the

president's response to the prime minister's campaign and preelection statements, there is a need to restore a sense of common purpose and practical cooperation to the relationship. The framework understanding with Iran won't make that task any easier, especially given Israeli opposition to it on grounds the administration does not accept. But it is not in the long-term interest of the United States to let the problems with Israel fester. Ironically, that will not reassure our Sunni Arab friends, who are likely to share many of Israel's concerns about an emerging Iran deal and who will see a gap between Washington and Jerusalem as an indicator that the administration is redefining its interests in the region in a troubling manner.

In this context, the formation of a new Israeli government led again by Binyamin Netanyahu gives the White House an opportunity. Washington should quietly reach out to the prime minister's office, perhaps with an administration outsider close to the president who could engage Netanyahu on Iran, the delegitimization movement, the Palestinian issue, and wider relations with the Arabs. On Iran, there ought to be a discussion on the areas where the Israelis have concerns: namely, on the character of the verification regime, on the ability to detect Iran's cheating, on the certainty of tough responses to such cheating, and on what will be done after the deal expires to prevent Iran from weaponizing. On the other issues, such a discussion could quietly: (1) promote more meaningful intelligence, counterterrorism, and security cooperation between Israel and all of our key Arab partners in the region;

(2) explore whether the Saudis, Emiratis, Jordanians, and Egyptians might be prepared to use the Arab Peace Initiative as an umbrella for a peace dialogue designed to give the Israelis justification for making concessions to the Palestinians while also giving the Palestinians cover for making compromises with the Israelis; and (3) get Israel to take initiatives (e.g., make its settlement policy consistent with its two-state policy) to help us blunt the efforts to delegitimize Israel. (Indeed, the administration can legitimately say its ability to blunt new international efforts against Israel—whether in the UN or outside it—will be very limited if the Israelis don't give us something to work with.) The U.S.-Israel relationship is too important—to each party and as a bellwether of American commitment to our allies in the region—to permit it to fray any further.

### **Conclusion**

If one sees underlying the region's conflicts a serious religious—and to some degree, in the case of Iran, a nationalist—challenge to the region's weak state system, then we should not assume that “time is on our side.” In a crisis of this magnitude, with basic assumptions of the regional order questioned, and the abilities of our regional allies being very limited, time passing without the restoration of stability means a higher likelihood of additional crises and conflicts beyond the three now before us (Syria, ISIS/al-Qaeda, and Iran). The United States and its allies must be seen as on the offensive and with growing momentum, in part to solidify the alliance, and in part to demoralize ISIS and its potential supporters.



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