Enhancing Leverage
by Jon B. Alterman

In October of last year, the White House made clear that three issues top President Obama’s Middle East agenda: Iran, Palestinian-Israeli peace, and containing the conflict in Syria. Common among all of these issues is that they are fundamentally about negotiations.

Americans often strive for “win-win” solutions that definitively resolve issues, and Middle Easterners find that approach naïve. Even so, that isn’t the biggest problem. What seems most absent from the U.S. negotiating toolkit is creative thinking about leverage. Americans often come into negotiations as the stronger party and therefore think leverage is less important. Yet, leverage is vital, and understanding how opponents use it is vital to U.S. success.

U.S. negotiators seem to have done best creating leverage in the Iran negotiations, where U.S.-led sanctions have created a sense of urgency on the Iranian side, and the threat of congressional action has provided a firm limit to U.S. concessions. It is unclear just how much leverage the United States has in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, in part because Israel has so much access to U.S. public opinion, and in part because no single party seems able to deliver the Palestinian side. In both cases, U.S. leverage is diminished because the other parties see their stakes in these conflicts as existential struggles. For the United States, resolving these conflicts is part of a long to-do list.

The government of Bashar al-Assad sees the battle for the future of Syria as an existential conflict, too, and for good reason. Yet a host of other parties also see this as a high-stakes game. Iran sees Syria as the linchpin of its efforts to exert influence in the Levant, and as a necessary protector of the Shi’ite community in Lebanon. Russia views Syria as a vital foothold to prevent U.S. clients from controlling the Levant, and as a bulwark against a jihadi takeover.

Thinking Beyond Oil

In downtown Riyadh, a new museum combines pumps and levers with touch-screen technology to teach Saudi schoolchildren about energy. The museum, Mishkat, encourages the 400 or so students who visit daily to envision a future in which the world—and Saudi Arabia—is less dependent on oil for either energy or money.

Mishkat is an initiative of the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE), the authority tasked with implementing Saudi Arabia’s ambitious goals to develop non-oil energy sources. KACARE aims to develop a mix of solar, nuclear, waste, geothermal, and wind energy to meet up to 30 percent of domestic energy needs by 2032. KACARE projects that Saudi Arabia’s energy use will triple from 2010 to 2028. Multiple studies have warned that if the Kingdom continues to rely almost entirely on oil and gas for energy, rising domestic consumption patterns will end the Kingdom’s role as a global exporter as soon as 2030. A visit to Mishkat begins with a 15-minute video called “The Kingdom of Renewable Energy” that lays out the argument for diversification with a positive, idealistic tone that belies the existential threat of current trends.

More than just about science, it’s about changing how Saudis think about the very foundations of their nation. ■

Gulf Roundtable with Ambassador William J. Burns

Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns spoke at a Gulf Roundtable at CSIS entitled “A Renewed Agenda for the U.S.-Gulf Partnership” on February 19, 2014. Burns argued that “for all the talk about rebalance and retrenchment, the Gulf remains central to American national interests, and partnership with the United States remains central to the national interests of Gulf states.” He outlined a wide array of cooperative efforts on security and suggested that security will remain the foundation of cooperation for many years into the future. While he acknowledged differences with many of the GCC states, he suggested that on a broad range of international and domestic issues, ranging from the Iranian nuclear program to Palestinian-Israeli peace and beyond, “our strategic interests will remain far more aligned than not...[and] we have far more to gain by working together than working separately.” You can watch the video or read a transcript of the event HERE. ■
of the area. Saudi Arabia and Qatar see Syria as a key part of their efforts to blunt Iranian hegemony in the Middle East, while Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and even Iraq reel from the influx of refugees that threaten their stability. To pursue their aims and to protect their interests, each of these parties is actively or passively backing antagonists in the struggle for Syria (although, to be fair, antagonists on both sides are finding succor from different parties in Lebanon). Several are doing so quite a lot, and each of them is fighting as if the outcome really matters.

The Obama administration has long been cautious about involvement in Syria, for fear that getting in would be far easier than getting out. Its initial strategy was two-pronged: trying to prevent the conflict from militarizing on the one hand, and seeking a split in the ruling clique on the other. In the last year or so, the administration has sought principally to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians inside and outside of the country while buffering neighbors from the effects of the conflict and pursuing some sort of negotiated solution in a multilateral forum. Underlying the strategy is a determination that U.S. action should be measured, predictable, and consensus driven.

The biggest problem with the U.S. strategy isn’t its goal, but its approach. That approach undermines U.S. leverage, which in turn undermines the U.S. ability to promote outcomes that serve its interests. This is for at least three reasons. First, the United States has been reluctant to articulate what is at stake for the United States in Syria, for fear of being drawn in further. This leads others to judge that the United States cares the least among the potential major actors in Syria. Second, the United States has moved slowly and cautiously while the situation on the ground has leapt ahead, often in undesirable ways. Third, when the U.S. government had an opportunity to act demonstratively if not decisively in August 2013—after the Assad government attacked its own people with chemical weapons on a large scale—the Obama administration seemed to have blinked. After a series of statements from the secretary of state that suggested to many that a U.S. strike was imminent, the seemingly hasty presidential decision not to mount any attack persuaded enemy and friend alike that there were, in fact, no circumstances under which the United States would increase its involvement in Syria.

Further, many regional observers concluded that the United States was more interested merely in having negotiations than in their practical outcome. In the lead up to January peace talks in Geneva, it is hard to see any evidence of actions the United States took to increase U.S. leverage vis-à-vis the Syrian government, its Russian and Iranian supporters, or Turkey—which plays its own role facilitating the flow of jihadists into Syria. Instead, the U.S. effort seemed focused on the question of who would be allowed to participate.

Meanwhile, the Assad government has increased its leverage by helping to morph this conflict into a battle between jihadists and their enemies. In that conflict, they believe, the world will take their side.

They are betting wrong. The reality is that governments are committed to stemming the rise of jihadists in Syria, but they are not committed to the survival of the Assad government. Iran, Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia all seem open to a negotiated solution between the combatants.

For the United States to play a role shaping the terms of such a solution, it needs to demonstrate a willingness to be more active and more ruthless. A limited direct military action would demonstrate not only that the United States has unmatched capabilities, but also the will to act at the time and place of its choosing. Such a strike could not resolve the conflict nor even tilt it decisively, but it would change the U.S. position at the negotiating table. Demonstrating both an ability and a willingness to do things antagonists don’t like would help persuade some of them not to do things the United States doesn’t like. The simple fact is this: success cannot be forged inside the negotiating room without being forged outside it. ■ 02/21/2014