Looking Beyond Syria and ISIS: America’s Real Strategic Needs in the Middle East

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When Secretary of Defense James Mattis left the Pentagon, he was quoted as describing Washington as a "strategy free zone." Secretary Mattis was all too accurate in noting the lack of effective United States strategies and strategic planning. However, he misstated the core problem that has affected virtually every key aspect of U.S. strategy since the end of the Cold War.

Washington has always had something that at least masqueraded as a strategy, even if it has almost always been little more than a broad concept or goal tied to short-term efforts that only addresses a fraction of the key issues involved. Washington’s real problem is not that it is a "strategy free zone." It is rather that is has become a "wrong strategy zone."

Washington as a "Wrong Strategy Zone."

Since at least the early 1990s, Washington has been a city incapable of pursuing a coherent strategy. What passes for strategy is made by a divided NSC and Presidential staff, and by competing elements of different Executive Departments, Congressional staffs, think tanks, and political lobbies. There is no coherent civil-military strategy or planning effort. Each Department still budgets on an input and line item basis, rather than programs by mission or strategic goal. And no serious effort is made to plan, program, and budget beyond a given year.

When the U.S. does issue an official strategy document, the "strategies" involved almost never are defined in terms of specific objectives, plans, timelines for action, resource requirements, and net assessments of risks. Moreover, the vague conceptual outlines of U.S. strategy that are made official tend to be re-worded on at least an annual basis and have increasingly been shaped in partisan and ideological terms.

This is the current case in every critical area of U.S. strategy. The U.S. never attempted to define practical plans, goals, and resources requirements in 2017 and 2018 when it issued a new National Security Strategy. It did not explain how it could deal with critical issues like Russia's growing asymmetric threats to NATO and the changes in Russian nuclear forces. It did not describe real world strategies for dealing with the emergence of a serious strategic threat from China. It focused on a pointless 2% of GDP goal for NATO rather than the Russian threat and extremism, and never provided a clear plan for either "rebalancing to Asia or "global rebalancing".

Even U.S. involvement in long wars has done little to keep Washington from being a "wrong strategy zone." U.S. strategy towards the Afghan War has not been tied to a credible regional strategy or global strategy to deal with terrorism and extremism. The civil and military aspects of the war have never been properly integrated into a given strategy, and the level and nature of the U.S. commitment to the war has become steadily more uncertain. From 2014 onwards, the U.S. approach to the war has flip-flopped on a near annual basis in ways better suited to the acrobatics of Circus Soleil than to successful warfighting.

The U.S. Strategic Morass in the Middle East and North Africa

U.S. strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa is another case in point, and one where U.S. failures have been most apparent. Since at least 2003, U.S. strategy in the MENA has all too
visibly changed from year to year. It has been divided, inconsistent, and lacking in effective real-world planning and implementation.

In fairness, most of the key problems in the MENA region – that have not been caused by the impact U.S. invasion of Iraq – have been driven by a wide range of basic failures of governance in the Arab world and by Iran. Key security problems in the Gulf have been driven by serious mistakes and divisions among America's Arab strategic partners.

The growing tension between Israel and the Palestinians has been driven by a slow Israeli drift towards confrontation with a steadily more dysfunctional set of competing Palestinian movements. As the UN Arab Development Reports first began to point out in 2002, the uprisings and civil conflicts that began in 2001 have been driven by the massive population growth in the region, failed and corruption governance, and by growing employment and income problems that result from failed economic growth and development.

Ever since Camp David, however, the U.S. has not been able to pursue a consistent approach to supporting Israel while moving towards a stable Arab-Israeli peace. The U.S. has addressed the security aspects of extremism and terrorism on a largely national basis without addressing the deep underlying causes that help trigger the rise of Al Qaida, ISIS, and the political major upheavals that began in 2011, and focused on fighting today's enemies as all of these causes have grown far worse.

The U.S. blundered into invading Iraq in a Neocon triumph of hope over experience, driven by massive politically-motivated false estimates regarding Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and support of terrorism. It then blundered far more in trying to stabilize Iraq at a political and economic level as it focused on fighting extremism.

The United States. destroyed Iraq's ability to use its conventional forces to counter Iran and deter and contain it in 2003-2004 and helped open up Iraq to Iranian influence and create potential corridor that extends from the Levant to Western Afghanistan. The United States has since fought a series of wars against extremism and terrorism in Iraq and Syria without defining a credible set of strategic goals that could end in bringing lasting stability to either state or prevent the reemergence of terrorism and an extremism.

Elsewhere in the region, the U.S. helped trigger the current low-level civil war in Libya by helping to oust Qaddafi but had no follow-up strategy. It temporized and flip-flopped in dealing with the anti-Assad movements in Syria in ways that not only preserved Assad, but allowed Russia, Iran and the Hezbollah to become major actors in Syria and far stronger hostile actors in the region. The U.S. also joined the Arab Gulf states in a steadily accelerating arms race and confrontation with Iran without setting any clear goals for developing an effective military posture to deter Iran.

The U.S. did briefly attempt to work out a modus vivendi with Iran through the JCPOA, but then withdrew in ways that pushed Iran towards a hardline position, and alienated America's European allies. It also failed to seriously address the civil and stability problems in its Arab Gulf strategic partners, focused on burdensharing rather than an effective military alliance, failed to act decisively in dealing with the Saudi-UAE led boycott of Qatar, and blundered into quasi-involvement in the Saudi-UAE war against the Houthi in Yemen.

An Absurdly Narrow Focus on Syria and ISIS
The current U.S. focus on Syria and ISIS is yet another example of Washington as a "wrong strategy zone." One can fault President Trump and the Administration for announcing a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, and one it has since had to modify in ways that focus almost exclusively on the number of U.S. military personnel in Syria, rather than what the U.S. actually plans to do in Syria. In fairness, however, there has been an amazing amount of media reporting, think tank analysis, and Congressional posturing that has had an equally narrow short-term focus on breaking up the ISIS Caliphate and U.S. military manpower in Western Syria.

The total U.S. military personnel levels in Syria that are the sole focus of much of the current debate over U.S. strategy are a terrible measure of both U.S. strategy capability and actual military activity. If one looks at the AFCENT airpower data, the U.S. had to deliver 39,577 munitions during its peak fighting against the Caliphate in Iraq in 2017, and quietly had to make a massive increase in the direct train and assist support provided to Iraqi and Syrian ground combat units. The U.S. then had to make a massive eightfold increase in air strikes necessary to support the fighting that was largely in Syria between July 2018 (241 weapons released) and December 2018 (2,214 weapons released) to help finish the fight against the "caliphate." It also had to fly some 14,015 IS&R sorties in 2017, and 7,800 IS&R sorties in 2018, to support the ground fighting.

It is equally absurd to focus on the defeat of the ISIS "Caliphate" in ways that fail to define the remaining threat posed by ISIS and other extremist and terrorist groups in Syria. As bad as ISIS was, it never dominated even the numbers of terrorist attacks and killings in Syrian conflicts that many experts now feel led to far more than 500,000 dead. If anything, it was state terrorism by Assad that dominated such killing.

And, it is actively dangerous to ignore all of the political, governance, economic, ethnic, and sectarian causes that led to the revolt against Assad in 2011 – and the rise of resulting extremism and terrorism. All these causes – including population pressure, youth unemployment, corruption, bad governance, weak rule of law and or security, grossly distorted economies, and a lack of real-world economic planning – are now far worse than they were in 2011. There also now is no practical way of significantly reducing the damage they have done for at least several years. The lack of any clear US effort to address these issues means that Syria may well become a real-world case where U.S. strategy consists of declaring victory and leaving – regardless of the consequences.

This is also a case where many of President Trump’s critics need to look in the mirror. The President has focused far too much on a few narrow short-term aspects of a far broader and enduring set of strategic problems. However, all too many of President Trump's political, media, and think tank critics – as well as many of his Arab and European critics – have been all too willing to adopt the same near-term focus on U.S. posture in Syria as if it made sense to develop a strategy that only dealt with ISIS, and in-country U.S. support of the Kurdish-Arab enclave in Eastern Syria.

No meaningful U.S. strategy for Syria can ignore the impact of Syria on the stability and security of Iraq – as well as on Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and the rise of Iranian, Russia and Hezbollah in the region. The fate of the Kurdish-Arab enclave in Eastern Syria cannot be separated from the fact that Iraq has so far done remarkably little to help its Sunnis recover from the fighting with ISIS in Western Iraq, from Turkey's exploitation of the Kurdish issue to justify Erdogan's authoritarianism, and from the complex mix of Syrian-Iraqi-Turkish-Iranian Kurdish factions that interact – often with armed elements – in all four countries.
No meaningful U.S. strategy can ignore the near-certain reality that ISIS will survive in some form in both Syria and Iraq, that other Sunni terrorist and extremist groups like Al Qaida and its spinoffs will continue to exist, and that Assad's rule through repression and state terrorism will inevitably encourage other Sunni groups to create some kind of organized resistance, and that Syria's massive refugee, IDP, and economic problems will also encourage violent elements.

A U.S. strategy focused on the current and potential threat posed by the Caliphate also ignores the long-term instability that will exist in Syria even under best case assumptions about rebuilding and expanding its crippled economy. It ignores the need to deal with the return or permanent resettlement of Syrian refugees and IDPs, and find some way to re-integrate Syria successfully back into the region.

This narrow U.S. focus on Syria is also critical because so little progress has been made in developing a U.S. strategy for Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf. The U.S. clearly needs a strategy that will allow CENTCOM to build the best mix of U.S. and Arab forces to deter and defend the Gulf, heal the breaches between the GCC states, and end the strains imposed by the war in Yemen.

The President and many of his critics seem equally wrong in dealing with other aspects of what passes for U.S. strategy. On the one hand, the Administration's focus on burden sharing and arms also makes little sense when the level of Arab interoperability and integration is so poor, key Arab Gulf strategic partners have real internal stability problems, and four out of six of these partner nations are already spending some 10% of their GDP on military and security forces. On the other hand, focusing on Khashoggi and the Yemen war without considering America's broader strategic interests is just as bad.

**The Need for A Real U.S. Strategy**

The MENA region has become the worst case example of the problems that arise when the U.S does not develop, openly debate, and actually implement effective U.S. strategies. It has reached the point where a "strategy free zone" may actually seem to be better than a "wrong strategy zone." The fact remains, however, that the U.S. has now seen a steady deterioration in both regional stability and its influence in the region for three Administrations during the decade and a half between 2003 and 2019.

The current focus of America's short attention span – on withdrawing from Syria and making exaggerated claims about the defeat of ISIS – will only make things worse. The same is true of the U.S. failures to try to shape some coherent approach to a wide range of other issues in the region.

These failures include key challenges like focusing on burdensharing and arms sales rather than security and stability, failing to reduce the critical divisions between its strategic partners in the Gulf, focusing on the military and civil steps necessary unite Iran and make it an effective check on Iraq, the Gulf, finding better options to dealing with Iran's growing asymmetric threats, failing to cooperate with its European allies in areas like the JCPOA and Syria, find ways to help heal Yemen, reducing Israeli and Palestinian tensions, and helping its Arab partners address both the civil and security causes of extremism and terrorism.

The U.S. does not have good or easy options, and it needs the kind of planning, programming, and budgeting exercise that will actually make the hard choices necessary to agree on, and act on, the least bad options. In the process, it will have to come to grips with the fact it does face serious regional threats from Iran and extremism, and must rely on uncertain and deeply divided security partners. It also will have face the fact that it will almost certainly take a decade or more for even
the best U.S. strategy to address some of key issues that are the result of the region's worst conflicts and civil failures in development, governance and security.

What the U.S. cannot afford to do, however, is to keep on focusing on short-term issues, lurching from one set of poorly defined goals to another, and spending more on defense without far better-defined plans and strategic objectives.

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