



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

U.S. POLICY AND STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

December 14, 2017

**Statement by the Hon. Eric Edelman
Counselor, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Reed, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on the need for a coherent strategy to address the manifold challenges confronting the United States in the Middle East. I have been intimately involved with the region throughout my career, including as Ambassador to Turkey and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. I have continued working on this issue since retiring from government service in 2009 as counselor at CSBA, as the Roger Hertog Distinguished practitioner in residence at Johns Hopkins SAIS, and as co-chair of task forces sponsored by JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy and Bipartisan Policy Center. In these capacities, I have co-authored a range of reports laying out recommendations for U.S. strategy, but the views expressed here today are purely my own.¹

As on other issues, our country is currently roiled in debates over what role the United States should play in the Middle East, as well as what role the region should play in our broader strategic calculus. Although the Middle East remains increasingly complex and volatile, and as the threats emanating from the region continue to threaten the U.S. and our allies both in the region and beyond, these debates are far from academic. I, therefore, applaud this committee for examining these matters and assembling today's panel of distinguished Foreign Service colleagues who have wrestled with the most intractable elements of the problems we face in the Middle East.

THE MIDDLE EAST STILL MATTERS

It has become a cliché to say that the American public is “war-weary” and supports diminished engagement with the world. There is certainly empirical evidence for that proposition. According to poll data from the Pew Center, in the run-up to last year's election, Americans wanted the new president to prioritize domestic over foreign policy by a

¹ I would like, however, to thank Jonathan Ruhe, Associate Director of the Gemunder Center at JINSA for his assistance in preparing this testimony and my colleagues on the JINSA, Bipartisan Policy Center, and Brookings task forces cited below for instructing me on the strategic issues that bedevil U.S. policy in the region. I would also like to thank my CSBA colleagues whose work on a Eurasian Defense Strategy for the United States is also reflected in this statement.

nationwide margin of four to one, as compared to an equal split only a decade prior.² Fifteen years and counting of difficult and seemingly inconclusive counterinsurgency (COIN) and stabilization operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus America's growing energy self-sufficiency, have fed the growing sense that the United States must bring the "endless wars" in the Middle East to a conclusion. This perception of public pressure has led the United States to attempt to limit its liability in the region by drawing down the U.S. military presence and extricating ourselves from the region's seemingly endless problems.

However tempting a strategy of disengagement might be, we should bear in mind that it would reverse a strong bipartisan consensus over the past 60 years that the maintenance of a stable regional balance and prevention of any external or regional power from dominating the Middle East is vital to the nation's security. After World War II, the Middle East, along with Europe and Asia, was seen as one of the vital theaters in which the Cold War confrontation with Soviet power would play out. U.S. policymakers have considered access to the region's energy resources vital for U.S. allies in Europe, and ultimately for the United States itself. Moreover, the region's strategic location—linking Europe and Asia—made it particularly important from a geopolitical point of view.

By the late 1960s, the United States assumed de facto responsibility as the outside guarantor of regional security. The British relinquished their commitments east of Suez, culminating in the Carter Doctrine, which explicitly threatened the use of U.S. military force to prevent "any outside force" from dominating the Persian Gulf. At the time, this was correctly understood as a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the possibility that the USSR would attempt to take advantage of the upheaval in revolutionary Iran to extend its dominion in the region. As a practical matter, the United States also made clear over the years that hegemony by a regional power was equally antithetical to the U.S. national interest. It was for that reason that the United States went to war to liberate Kuwait in 1991 and pursued a policy of "dual containment" against both Iraq's and Iran's ambitions to dominate the region.³

Since 2009 the United States has pursued a policy of retrenchment and limited liability in the region that has raised questions about its role as the Middle East's security guarantor. This was first made clear during the Obama Administration, which expressed through policy statements its desire to unburden America of the region altogether and "pivot" to East Asia. As a result, the United States withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, it failed to uphold its own red line against Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013, and President Obama expressed a desire for Saudi Arabia and Iran to "share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."⁴

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program removed some limits on Iran's power projection capabilities by freeing up resources that Tehran subsequently redirected to its weapons programs and support for proxies. The agreement was seen by many Sunni Arab allies in the region as undermining U.S. pledges to constrain

² "Public Uncertain, Divided Over America's Place in the World," Pew Research Center, May 5, 2016; and Richard Wike, "Where Americans and Europeans Agree, Disagree on Foreign Policy," *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, June 14, 2016.

³ For an in-depth examination of the historical U.S. role in the Middle East, see Eric S. Edelman and Whitney Morgan McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat: A Defense Strategy for a Troubled Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, March 15, 2017), pp. 3–19.

⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

Tehran's revisionist ambitions in the region.⁵ President Trump's policies in the region to this point, although couched in very different rhetoric, have broadly continued the policies of his predecessor, perhaps reflecting the views of the Middle East he put forth during the campaign. He called it "one big, fat quagmire" and welcomed Russian intervention in Syria. Whether or not he will put into place a different strategy remains an open question.⁶

Notwithstanding the region's difficulties and an understandable desire to disengage, the geostrategic and economic factors that made the Middle East so important to our national security in the past are just as potent today. First, despite rising U.S. energy production and prospective self-sufficiency, real or even potential disruptions to the flow of oil anywhere would have serious negative effects on our economy. This is especially true of the Middle East, which contains half of global proven oil reserves, accounts for one-third of oil production and exports, and is home to three of the world's four biggest oil transit chokepoints. Moreover, U.S. allies remain vulnerable to disruptions in the flow of oil.⁷

Second, due to globalization and the region's critical location, instability there still reverberates outward through Europe, Africa, East Asia, and even the American homeland.⁸ This depends very little on our direct involvement in the region, as radical Islamists have made clear their grievances run much deeper than our footprint there.⁹ Indeed, ISIS only grew into a regional, then global, threat largely because of our diminishing presence and the security vacuum it created. At the same time, the Assad regime's indiscriminate offensives against its own people have triggered massive refugee outflows that are exacerbating Europe's already strained economic and social fabric and threatening to overwhelm the security institutions of some of our closest allies.

Third, the United States has strong incentives to support our regional allies both as a matter of our ideals and our interests. If we are seen to be abandoning our Gulf partners in the face of Iran's aspirations to dominate the region, or if we walk back our red lines on Syria, how can we be trusted—by friends or by foes—to maintain our commitments elsewhere in the world like the Baltics, the Korean Peninsula, or the South China Sea?

ADDRESSING TWIN CHALLENGES

Today there are two primary, intertwined threats to U.S. interests in the Middle East, not counting the underlying absence of a real U.S. strategy to address them. First is Iran's quest for regional hegemony through increasingly overt interventions in neighboring conflicts, support for terrorist proxies, and its continuing pursuit of weapons capabilities like ballistic missiles—capabilities that, in the long run, only make sense in the context of achieving a nuclear capability, which will be within reach when the terms of the JCPOA expire. The second is the persistence of Sunni Islamic extremism, even after the demise of the Islamic

⁵ "Strategy to Restore U.S. Leverage Against Iran," JINSA Gemunder Center Iran Task Force, July 2017, p. 20.

⁶ "'This Week' Transcript: Donald Trump," *ABC News*, October 14, 2015.

⁷ *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, 66th edition (London: BP, June 2017), pp. 13–24; and Energy Information Administration (EIA), *World Oil Transit Chokepoints* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Energy, July 25, 2017). See also Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, *Oil Security 2025: U.S. National Security Policy in an Era of Domestic Oil Abundance*, (Washington, DC: Securing America's Future Energy [SAFE], 2014).

⁸ For an analysis of the continued importance of the Middle East to the United States, see Edelman and McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat*, pp. 22–23.

⁹ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost: Principles for a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," Bipartisan Policy Center, April 2017, p. 5.

State's physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq. These two threats drive the region's many crises, and also one another: Iranian expansion fuels Sunni extremism, and vice versa.¹⁰

These twin symbiotic challenges will only grow more dangerous over time if a security vacuum is created by an absence of U.S. leadership. American policymakers must rebuild what Dean Acheson called "situations of strength" by disrupting this destabilizing dynamic that threatens the entire region.¹¹

Adopt a Post-ISIS Strategy for Syria and Iraq

Most urgently, the United States needs a plan reflecting the new realities on the ground in Syria, where Iran is currently the most vulnerable and the potential for renascent Sunni extremism is the highest. ISIS has lost its self-declared caliphate; at the same time, the Assad regime is trying to take back the entire country with significant assistance, and even direction, from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-sponsored foreign Shi'a militias. These gains threaten to entrench Tehran and Moscow as the arbiters of postwar Syria, consolidating Iran's control of a "land bridge" connecting it directly to Lebanon.¹² By placing the country even more firmly under what is sure to be seen as a Shiite thumb—one that has profoundly alienated Syria's Sunnis—this outcome would also fuel the grievances driving recruitment for "ISIS 2.0," not to mention the local al-Qaeda affiliate Tahrir al-Sham and other jihadist groups still battling the regime in northwest Syria.¹³

While there are few appealing options in Syria, we can and should exploit Iran's overextension there to create the conditions for an acceptable outcome. Defense Secretary Mattis' recent statement that U.S. troops will remain in Syria to prevent the reemergence of ISIS is a necessary first step.¹⁴ As our JINSA Iran Task Force argued, Mattis' goal can only be accomplished if U.S. forces also help our surrogates on the ground—chiefly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—hold strategic territory liberated from ISIS.

This will provide vital leverage in determining Syria's postwar fate and pose serious obstacles to Iranian-backed forces reconquering the entire country, thus cementing their land bridge. It will also mitigate one of the greatest constraints on U.S. policy, which is simply the widespread belief in the region that the U.S. wants nothing more than to remove itself, and any leverage, as soon as ISIS is defeated.¹⁵

The conflict against ISIS has allowed Iran to strengthen its grip over neighboring Iraq as well. As in Syria, Iran's sway over Iraq's security and interior ministries threatens to alienate the country's Sunnis—Arab and Kurdish—much as former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's purge of Sunnis contributed to ISIS running amok through Iraq in the first place.

¹⁰ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," pp. 7–8.

¹¹ For the importance of building up U.S. strength more broadly to secure U.S. national security, see Derek Chollet et al., *Building "Situations of Strength": A National Security Strategy for the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, February 2017). For the background on Acheson, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 80–81.

¹² "Countering Iranian Expansion in Syria," JINSA Gemunder Center Iran Task Force, July 2017, p. 7.

¹³ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," pp. 10–11.

¹⁴ Jamie McIntyre and Travis Tritten, "Jim Mattis on Syria: 'We're not just going to walk away' after ISIS," *Washington Examiner*, November 14, 2017.

¹⁵ Edelman and McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat*, p. 66; and "Countering Iranian Expansion in Syria," pp. 12–13.

Iran's role in Iraq also gives it influence over a key producer in the global oil market, and its presence in Syria places it astride the strategic crossroads of the entire region.¹⁶

Because an uncontested Iranian presence in these two countries would give it a dangerous edge in its quest for Middle East supremacy, the United States would be misguided to try to offset Iran's gains here by pushing back in secondary theaters like Yemen. Thwarting Iran's ambition to upend the regional order requires blocking it from creating a chain of satellite states across the region's heartland. This should include helping craft some form of local Sunni Arab governance to preempt the reemergence of the kinds of sectarian and economic grievances that fostered ISIS. Indeed, the United States will need to promote credible, accountable and inclusive—if not always democratic—state and local political institutions in the region more broadly if it hopes to address the underlying permissive causes of Sunni extremism and Iranian expansion.¹⁷

Develop Credible Military Leverage Against Iran

Limiting the spread of these twin challenges in Syria and Iraq is the most urgent, but perhaps most difficult, task in the Middle East confronting American policymakers. Tehran has made deep inroads in both countries; it also shares longstanding ties with both antedating the current situation.

As our JINSA Task Force argued, the United States must also develop leverage where it can impose costs most effectively and credibly on Iran's malign behaviors. Despite the JCPOA's sanctions relief windfall and the regular IRGC harassment of U.S. Navy vessels in the Persian Gulf, for now U.S. naval and air power in the theater outmatches Iran's. To begin, the Pentagon should announce it is updating contingency plans to neutralize Iran's nuclear facilities, should Iran materially breach or withdraw from the JCPOA in response to U.S. enforcement.

Just as it appears to be doing to counter North Korean threats, the Pentagon must develop credible capabilities in preparation for a possible shoot-down of future Iranian tests of nuclear-capable missiles.¹⁸ To this end, Congress should consider requiring the Pentagon to forward-deploy part of our Aegis-equipped missile defense fleet to the Persian Gulf, as it already has in Europe and East Asia. U.S. Navy ships must also fully utilize rules of engagement to defend themselves and the Persian Gulf against Iran's continual violations of basic rules and norms at sea.¹⁹

It is equally important the United States cooperate more closely with its regional allies. Policymakers must foster genuine collective defense among its Gulf partners—led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—that are taking it upon themselves, together, to push back against Iran. Formal U.S. military backing, as well as encouragement for *sub rosa* support from Israel, are crucial for directing these energies in concert against Iranian provocations—and to assuage their sense of insecurity and frustration with Tehran's increasingly outsized role in their backyard. We must work with these allies on robust

¹⁶ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," p. 10.

¹⁷ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," pp. 11–12, 15–16.

¹⁸ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Downing North Korean Missiles is Hard. So the U.S. Is Experimenting," *New York Times*, November 16, 2017.

¹⁹ "Strategy to Restore U.S. Leverage Against Iran," pp. 21, 27.

multi-layered theater missile defenses and interoperable air and maritime defenses in the Persian Gulf.²⁰

Furthermore, the recent ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on U.S. defense assistance to Israel should be treated as the floor for cooperation, and the MoU's artificial caps on U.S. missile defense assistance to Israel must be removed. Not only do U.S. systems benefit directly from joint research and production with Israel, but Jordan and Egypt now effectively shelter under Israel's umbrella—the importance of which only increases with the IRGC and Hezbollah ensconced along the Golan Heights.

Recognize Russia as an Obstacle, Not a Partner

Russia has played no small part in enabling Iran and its proxies to establish a new front against Israel and Jordan in southwest Syria. Indeed, there is a prevalent misperception that Moscow and Tehran could be profitably divided through deft U.S. diplomacy. In reality, both Russia and Iran want to roll back U.S. influence even further in the region, and each depends on the other to help it do so—primarily in Syria, but also through deepening Russian diplomatic, economic and technical assistance for Iran's nuclear and conventional weapons programs. Benefitting as much as it does, Russia is unlikely to reduce its ties with Iran at anything approaching an acceptable cost to the United States. Nor is Moscow's approach to counterterrorism at all complementary to our own. On the contrary, Russia's indiscriminate bludgeoning of Syrian cities from the air destroyed the moderate opposition and gave further fuel to Sunni grievances.²¹

Increase Internal Pressure Against the Iranian Regime

Hardliners within Iran's regime are the main beneficiaries of the JCPOA, as the Supreme Leader and IRGC control the economic sectors standing to gain the most from sanctions relief. Yet this also makes them dependent on a narrowing band of loyalists to maintain stability, especially as everyday Iranians fail to feel the benefits of sanctions relief. For all the regime's bluster toward America, it still fears being removed from power in the same way that it seized power in 1979.

We should exploit these fears as an added form of leverage. A more aggressive political warfare campaign would amplify international investors' wariness of the Iranian market by highlighting the complexities of sanctions compliance, as well as the elite's corrupt business dealings and systemic human rights abuses. To this end, Congress and the administration should intensify "non-nuclear" sanctions on the regime and publicize to the Iranian populace exactly where the windfall from sanctions relief is going.²²

Enforce Nuclear Restrictions on Iran

The United States must also rebuild leverage to address Iran's serial under-compliance with the JCPOA. This has slowly eaten away at U.S. credibility in Tehran's eyes and raises the risks of Iran continuing to advance toward nuclear weapons capability. Precisely because the JCPOA has been so disastrous, the United States must restore leverage over Iran before

²⁰ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," p. 13; and "Strategy to Restore U.S. Leverage Against Iran," p. 28.

²¹ "Seeking Stability at Sustainable Cost," pp. 13–15.

²² Edelman and McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat*, p. 66; and "Strategy to Restore U.S. Leverage Against Iran," pp. 24–25, 29.

deciding the deal's fate. In addition to the measures already mentioned, this means imposing every restriction in the JCPOA and UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 regarding enrichment capacity, inspections, illicit procurement activities, and possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program. These concentric pressures offer the best prospects to force Tehran ultimately back to the negotiating table under circumstances far more favorable to the United States and its allies.²³

Though these steps are many, we must take the first ones now to prevent the further erosion of our stabilizing presence and leadership role in the Middle East. I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for my time, and I look forward to the Committee's questions.

²³ "Strategy to Restore U.S. Leverage Against Iran," pp. 26–32.
