

# **America's "Chaos Strategy" in the Middle East and South Asia**

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It does not take a great deal of vision to see that the United States has no clear strategy for any of the wars it is fighting in the Middle East and South Asia, and no clear strategy for dealing with any of the other strategic challenges in either region. The day-to-day focus of the media on some individual problem or event cannot disguise the fact that the U.S. makes decisions from day-to-day on a piecemeal basis. It lurches from issue to issue and high-level trip to trip. It wins tactical victories with no clear strategic impact or lasting impact on regional stability. It reacts in the short-term, and U.S. grand strategy is little more than the chaos dictated by external events.

America's longest wars are still being fought without any clear goals, and the U.S. is dealing with challenges like the broad instability in the Arab world, Iran, Russian intervention, and Turkey's war with the Kurds in an inchoate and piecemeal fashion. More than that, it has focused on fighting ISIS and the Taliban without any clear strategy for dealing with the other military challenges in the region, and without addressing the civil dimension of the insurgencies in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, or the need for political stability and economic development.

If one looks across the Middle East and South Asia, all of the forces that have led to regional instability have grown worse with time and not better. The so-called "Arab Spring" has done nothing to bring stability to the Arab world. The only "success" is a fragile and unstable Tunisia. Algeria and Egypt remain problematic authoritarian states that continue to meet the needs of their ruling elites, but not of their peoples. Talk of an Arab-Israeli peace process rings hollow even by the low standards of the past, and Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the Hezbollah all present new challenges and risks of war.

If the U.S. has any real strategy to achieve a successful outcome in Syria, it is one of the best kept secrets in its history. Its so-called "defeat" of the "caliphate" will leave major cadres of extremists intact, Assad in control of much of Syria, and Iraq critically divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. It will also leave all of the countries in the area—aside from Israel—lacking clear prospects for recovery and development, torn by ethnic and sectarian divisions, facing massive youth unemployment problems, and led by corrupt and divided regimes. As for outside powers, the U.S. has no clear strategy for dealing with either Russia's growing role or Turkey's war with the Kurds.

The war against ISIS has left Iran with a major influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq; further shattered and failed economies; and refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) crises. All the forces that generate extremism remain, as do the struggles between Sunni and Shi'ite, and Arab, Kurd, and other factions. Years ago, then General David Petraeus asked a key question about the war in Iraq: "How does this war end?" There was no credible answer then, and there is no clear answer now. And not only for Iraq: The lack of any clear plan to end the war now includes Syria, with Russia and Turkey joining Iran as outside players.

Iran does not seem to be actively pursuing nuclear weapons, but the U.S. has no clear strategy for dealing with the limits to the JCPOA nuclear agreement and no clear basis for even a dialogue with the its European allies as to how to fix this. It has not announced any strategy for dealing with Iran's expanding role in the region, its growing missile forces and potential acquisition of precision strike systems, or its build-up of an asymmetric naval-air-missile threat to shipping in the Gulf and nearby waters in the Gulf of Oman.

The U.S. has so far failed to help end the childish quarrel of feuding princes in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE that has shattered an already weak and divided Gulf Cooperation Council. It has been unable to influence Bahrain's ruling elite to move towards reform, help Kuwait achieve more unity, and help Oman cope with its economic and employment challenges. Some elements of U.S. forces are involved in the other areas of conflict in the Gulf and Red Sea, but the U.S. has no clear strategy for dealing with the other problems in the Red Sea region: Yemen, Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Sudan. Worse, it has no strategy of plan that would bring lasting military and civil stability to any one of these countries.

The U.S. has written off Central Asia, and ties its relations with India to making it a counterbalance to China. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have never really mattered in grand strategic terms. Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, make up the longest of America's long wars and once again, the U.S. has no answer to the question: "How does this war end?"

America has made major improvement to its tactics and force development plans in Afghanistan, but done nothing to deal with civil and political stability. It not only faces a deteriorating security situation, it has no clear political, governance, or economic strategy to produce Afghan stability. It also ignores the fact that the central government seems to be shrinking back to becoming the government of "Kabulstan." As for Pakistan, the U.S. has threatened, cut aid, and may apply sanctions, but seems to have no positive plans to either make Pakistan into a meaningful ally or help it achieve stability.

In theory, President Trump tasked a series of strategy studies that should have produced some integrated and coherent approach to these problems when he came to office. So far, however, the result has been limited improvements in selected aspects of the U.S. warfighting effort that have not been tied to a clear grand strategy in any given areas, much less an integrated grand strategy to cover a deeply interconnected region.

The end result has been to burden the U.S. military—and particularly USCENTCOM—with mission impossible. The military must try to find tactical military solutions to a series of civil-military problems where there is no clear civil effort and no coherent military strategy that looks beyond fighting ISIS and the Taliban. The end result that the U.S. relies on the chaos of reactive and disconnected actions and its occasional strategic and grand strategic rhetoric is nothing more than a constantly changing mix of hollow myths.