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Panel: Reordering the Middle East

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Talking Points for: Karen E. House, Pepperdine University

Can the United States Play a Constructive Role Given Such Tectonic Changes?

- I. OVERVIEW OF HOW OBAMA ADMINISTRATION VIEWS THE PERSIAN GULF—INDEED, THE WHOLE MIDDLE EAST
 - A. Doesn't care much about international affairs in the Middle East, Ukraine or anywhere. Truly wants to be a domestic president; Wants to rid his hands of troublesome foreign issues.
 - B. Seeks a fig leaf that will allow him to conclude a deal to forestall Iran's nuclear development to burnish his legacy (he sees Iran deal on par with Nixon opening to China).
 - C. Offering a TOKEN effort on ISIS because U.S. domestic politics demands it after beheading of two American journalists. Americans don't want war but oppose ISIS.
 - D. Benign neglect of our traditional allies in the region—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel.

- II. WHO IS BENEFITING FROM THIS U.S. POLICY?
 - A. Iran is the big winner.
 - a. Its influence continues to grow from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon.
 - b. Client Assad has survived and now is strengthening as focus shifts to ISIS.
 - c. Client Hezbollah strong.
 - d. Iraqi Shiite regime more dependent than ever on Iran for its survival.
 - e. While Iran is seen by some as an anti-democratic country and the source of anti U.S. religious extremism, Tehran still benefits in comparison to ISIS.
 - f. Idea of U.S. military action against Iran is off the table; indeed, idea of resuming harsh sanctions is far-fetched.

 - B. Assad is runner up in the winner sweepstakes.

 - C. Big loser is the United States, which has lost its credibility with everyone in the region.
 - a. Turkey thumbing its nose at United States; Egypt estranged.
 - i. Saudi Arabia and Israel have no trust in United States and Iraq, where United States has invested much, and is turning into Iranian client.

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- D. Runner up in the loser category is Saudi Arabia.
 - a. Facing rival caliphate claim from ISIS.
 - b. Oil prices at USD 60 when Saudi needs USD 80-90 a barrel to sustain the royal largess and rule.
 - c. Saudi Arabia caught in a civil war in Yemen, where past interventions haven't turned out well.

III. WHAT CAN UNITED STATES DO?

1. Stop pretending the nuclear deal with Iran is a solution to these problems. The deal under discussion will only enhance Iran's stature and further alienate and weaken U.S. traditional allies as well as spark a nuclear arms race.
2. Realize pinprick airstrikes will not "degrade and destroy" ISIS. To give Arab coalition partners confidence to stand up to these forces, the United States must provide limited U.S. ground forces for special operations and intelligence gathering.
3. Recognize ISIS is not just another terrorist group but rather an organization systematically building a state structure. Decapitation by aerial bombing won't change this. Acknowledge that just because Iran opposes ISIS too, doesn't mean Iran is an ally. The enemy of my enemy is, as Netanyahu stated, still my enemy.
4. Most of all, educate the U.S. public that this is a generational struggle among Muslims with differing views of how to restore Islam's power. We can't resolve that dispute, but must encourage moderate Muslims to lead. United States must have patience of a cancer patient to accept we can't eradicate the cancer, but must patiently endure prolonged and unpleasant treatments to contain its spread.

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