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Melissa Dalton is a senior fellow and deputy director of the CSIS International Security Program (ISP). Her research focuses on U.S. defense policy in the Middle East, global U.S. defense strategy and policy, and security cooperation with U.S. allies and partners. As deputy director, she advises the director of ISP on a broad range of strategic and management issues. Prior to CSIS, she served in a number of positions at the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2007 to 2014. She most recently was a senior adviser for force planning, where she contributed to the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review and DoD's planning guidance. Previously, she served as special assistant to the under secretary of defense for policy, as policy adviser to the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, Afghanistan, and as country director for Lebanon and Syria. In 2012, she was a visiting fellow at the Center for a New American Security. Prior to her DoD service, she taught English to middle and high school students in Damascus, Syria, in 2006. From 2003 to 2005, she served as an intelligence analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Dalton's commentary and analysis have appeared in CNN, MSNBC, the New York Times, Bloomberg, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Fortune, Defense News, and the National Interest. She holds a B.A. in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia and an M.A. in international relations and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She was 2014–2015 Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow and is a Council on Foreign Relations term member.