

Inquiring Minds Topic – 10 July 2015

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America and the Middle East

Why America must stay engaged in the Middle East

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IN THE mid-1990s a celebrated Syrian playwright captured the anguish of living under an Arab autocrat with the lament, “We are condemned to hope.” Almost 20 years later, even hope has withered.

The Middle Eastern order sustained by the United States has collapsed. Civil wars are devouring Syria, Iraq and Libya. Black-robed jihadists from Islamic State (IS) have carved out a caliphate. Vying with Iran for regional influence, Saudi jets are strafing Shia rebels in Yemen. Peace may not return to the Middle East for a generation.

For most Arabs, including presidents and kings, the lesson is that American power has had its day. For most Americans, including the man in the White House, the lesson is that outsiders cannot impose order on chaos. Both claims are exaggerated. The Middle East desperately needs a new, invigorated engagement from America. That would not only be within America’s power, it would also be in America’s interest.

Desperate times

The starting-point is to understand what has gone so disastrously wrong in the Arab world. Democrats in Washington will tell you that the villain is George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq in 2003, creating a bloodthirsty Sunni insurgency and, across the region, a hunger for rebellion. Republicans insist that the fault lies with Barack Obama for letting Iran dominate Iraq and failing to curb the villainy of Syria’s Bashar Assad.

In fact there is more than enough blame to go round. As that Syrian playwright suggested,, the roots of the Arab malaise run deep. After the second world war, centuries of infantilising colonial rule gave way to woeful self-government. Arab economies were regulated, subsidised and planned so clumsily that they failed to provide for Arab citizens. Leaders, lacking legitimacy, took refuge in Arab nationalism and came to depend on coercion instead of consent. Young

populations without prospects found comfort in religion, some in the zealotry peddled by the likes of IS. For years America propped up its client states in this failing order. But the Arab spring showed that the stability Mr Bush shattered at such great cost was already doomed. Mr Obama's inaction only added momentum to an unfolding catastrophe.

All the more reason to stay out, perhaps. Except that America has interests in the Middle East. Today's chaos is trashing human rights and torching values that many, including this newspaper, look to America to defend. Not everyone will agree—some Americans are tired of their country acting as a global policeman, and others rightly point out that its geopolitical priority is China's growing ambition. But even allowing that, the Middle East still matters.

Terrorism in places like Libya or Syria sooner or later ends up striking at the West. IS's successes in Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria attract money and fighters. Minimising the threat means doing more in places where jihadism flourishes.

Then there is oil. Thanks to fracking, the United States has become the world's swing producer, and within a decade or so the North American continent stands to produce as much energy as it consumes. But the oil price is global, and the Middle East still accounts for one in every three barrels of seaborne crude. Pricing power and self-sufficiency do not make America immune to upheaval in energy markets. If it cannot keep the oil flowing, its economy will suffer grievously and so will its claim to global leadership.

Last is nuclear proliferation. America has sponsored a deal to prevent Iran from gaining the bomb for at least a decade. If the talks succeed, America will need to act as enforcer-in-chief. If they fail, it must be at the centre of efforts to prevent Iran crossing the nuclear threshold. Either way, it must be a brake on other regional powers who might think of launching weapons programmes of their own.

Mr Obama has identified all these interests. His diplomats were in Paris this week to talk about IS. This month they will be thrashing out the nuclear deal with Iran. He has personally pledged to ensure oil supplies flow. And yet his goals are undermined by his determination to stand back from the region. His aim has been to force the Middle East to take more responsibility for running its own affairs. But the vacuum he has created has only exacerbated the strife and disorder.

Instead, Mr Obama needs to set out a strategy of constructive containment. No actor can simply put the Middle East together again, but America can help stop the damage spreading.

The first requirement is better diplomacy. Mr Obama has shunned the State Department, preferring a coterie in the White House. Partly as a result, America was ill-prepared for the coup by Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. When Mr Obama withdrew troops from Iraq, he should have emphasised diplomacy and built up Iraq's institutions. Instead, Iranian influence grew and the Shia-led government alienated Iraq's Sunnis. More political engagement is needed. America must not give up striving to end the conflict between Israel and Palestine. But Mr Obama also needs to work with Turkey to create a moderate force in Syria and with Saudi Arabia to stop the fighting in Yemen. And he should encourage economic and political reform in the Gulf and Egypt, which cling to a moribund "stability" for fear that change will run amok. He must be ready to use force. Mr Obama's taboo about deploying American soldiers against IS in Iraq has led to a self-defeating shortage of special forces to guide air strikes to their targets.

Desperate measures

This work is dogged and often thankless. America must accept that its relations with Arab countries will be pragmatic. Fighting alongside Iran in Iraq and opposing it in Syria is a contradiction. Get used to it: the region has not stopped shifting in unreconcilable ways. The Iraqi Kurds are useful allies even though—against American policy—they want their own homeland. America may need to deal with Mr Sisi to calm Libya.

The idea has taken root that America no longer has what it takes to run the Middle East. That it ever could was an illusion. But America still has a vital part to play. If it continues to stand back, everyone will be worse off—including Americans.

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A Net Assessment of the Middle East

by George Friedman - Geopolitical Weekly - Stratfor, June 9, 2015

The term "Middle East" has become enormously elastic. The name originated with the British Foreign Office in the 19th century. The British divided the region into the Near East, the area closest to the United Kingdom and most of North Africa; the Far East, which was east of British India; and the Middle East, which was between British India and the Near East. It was a useful model for organizing the British Foreign Office and important for the region as well, since the British — and to a lesser extent the French — defined not only the names of the region but also the states that emerged in the Near and Far East.

Today, the term Middle East, to the extent that it means anything, refers to the Muslim-dominated countries west of Afghanistan and along the North African shore. With the exception of Turkey and Iran, the region is predominantly Arab and predominantly Muslim. Within this region, the British created political entities that were modeled on European nation-states. The British shaped the Arabian Peninsula, which had been inhabited by tribes forming complex coalitions, into Saudi Arabia, a state based on one of these tribes, the Saudis. The British also created Iraq and crafted Egypt into a united monarchy. Quite independent of the British, Turkey and Iran shaped themselves into secular nation-states.

This defined the two fault lines of the Middle East. The first was between European secularism and Islam. The Cold War, when the Soviets involved themselves deeply in the region, accelerated the formation of this fault line. One part of the region was secular, socialist and built around the military. Another part, particularly focused on the Arabian Peninsula, was Islamist, traditionalist and royalist. The latter was pro-Western in general, and the former — particularly the Arab parts — was pro-Soviet. It was more complex than this, of course, but this distinction gives us a reasonable framework.

The second fault line was between the states that had been created and the underlying reality of the region. The states in Europe generally conformed to the definition of nations in the 20th century. The states created by the Europeans in the Middle East did not. There was something at a lower level and at a higher level. At the lower level were the tribes, clans and ethnic groups that not only made up the invented states but also were divided by the borders. The higher level was broad religious loyalties to Islam and to the major movements of Islam, Shiism and Sunnism that laid a transnational claim on loyalty. Add to this the pan-Arab movement initiated by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who argued that the Arab states should be united into a single Arab nation.

Any understanding of the Middle East must therefore begin with the creation of a new political geography after World War I that was superimposed on very different social and political realities and was an attempt to limit the authority of broader regional and ethnic groups. The solution that many states followed was to embrace secularism or traditionalism and use them as tools to manage both the subnational groupings and the claims of the broader religiosity. One unifying point was Israel, which all opposed. But even here it was more illusion than reality. The secular socialist states, such as Egypt and Syria, actively opposed Israel. The traditional royalist states, which were threatened by the secular socialists, saw an ally in Israel.

Aftershocks From the Soviet Collapse

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting collapse of support for the secular socialist states, the power of the traditional royalties surged. This was not simply a question of money, although these states did have money. It was also a question of values. The socialist secularist movement lost its backing and its credibility. Movements such as Fatah, based on socialist secularism — and Soviet support — lost power relative to emerging groups that embraced the only ideology left: Islam. There were tremendous cross currents in this process,

but one of the things to remember was that many of the socialist secular states that had begun with great promise continued to survive, albeit without the power of a promise of a new world. Rulers like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Syria's Bashar al Assad and Iraq's Saddam Hussein remained in place. Where the movement had once held promise even if its leaders were corrupt, after the Soviet Union fell, the movement was simply corrupt.

The collapse of the Soviet Union energized Islam, both because the mujahideen defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan and because the alternative to Islam was left in tatters. Moreover, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait took place in parallel with the last days of the Soviet Union. Both countries are remnants of British diplomacy. The United States, having inherited the British role in the region, intervened to protect another British invention — Saudi Arabia — and to liberate Kuwait from Iraq. From the Western standpoint, this was necessary to stabilize the region. If a regional hegemon emerged and went unchallenged, the consequences could pyramid. Desert Storm appeared to be a simple and logical operation combining the anti-Soviet coalition with Arab countries.

The experience of defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan and the secular regimes' loss of legitimacy opened the door to two processes. In one, the subnational groupings in the region came to see the existing regimes as powerful but illegitimate. In the other, the events in Afghanistan brought the idea of a pan-Islamic resurrection back to the fore. And in the Sunni world, which won the war in Afghanistan, the dynamism of Shiite Iran — which had usurped the position of politico-military spokesman for radical Islam — made the impetus for action clear.

There were three problems. First, the radicals needed to cast pan-Islamism in a historical context. The context was the transnational caliphate, a single political entity that would abolish existing states and align political reality with Islam. The radicals reached back to the Christian Crusades for historical context, and the United States — seen as the major Christian power after its crusade in Kuwait — became the target. Second, the pan-Islamists needed to demonstrate that the United States was both vulnerable and the enemy of Islam. Third, they had to use the subnational groups in various countries to build coalitions to overthrow what were seen as corrupt Muslim regimes, in both the secular and the traditionalist worlds.

The result was al Qaeda and its campaign to force the United States to launch a crusade in the Islamic world. Al Qaeda wanted to do this by carrying out actions that demonstrated American vulnerability and compelled U.S. action. If the United States did not act, it would enhance the image of American weakness; if it did act, it would demonstrate it was a crusader hostile to Islam. U.S. action would, in turn, spark uprisings against corrupt and hypocritical Muslim states, sweep aside European-imposed borders and set the stage for uprisings. The key was to demonstrate the weakness of the regimes and their complicity with the Americans.

This led to 9/11. In the short run, it appeared that the operation had failed. The United States reacted massively to the attacks, but no uprising occurred in the region, no regimes were toppled, and many Muslim regimes collaborated with the Americans. During this time, the

Americans were able to wage an aggressive war against al Qaeda and its Taliban allies. In this first phase, the United States succeeded. But in the second phase, the United States, in its desire to reshape Iraq and Afghanistan — and other countries — internally, became caught up in the subnational conflicts. The Americans got involved in creating tactical solutions rather than confronting the strategic problem, which was that waging the war was causing national institutions in the region to collapse.

In destroying al Qaeda, the Americans created a bigger problem in three parts: First, they unleashed the subnational groups. Second, where they fought they created a vacuum that they couldn't fill. Finally, in weakening the governments and empowering the subnational groups, they made a compelling argument for the caliphate as the only institution that could govern the Muslim world effectively and the only basis for resisting the United States and its allies. In other words, where al Qaeda failed to trigger a rising against corrupt governments, the United States managed to destroy or compromise a range of the same governments, opening the door to transnational Islam.

The Arab Spring was mistaken for a liberal democratic rising like 1989 in Eastern Europe. More than anything else, it was a rising by a pan-Islamic movement that largely failed to topple regimes and embroiled one, Syria, in a prolonged civil war. That conflict has a subnational component — various factions divided against each other that give the al Qaeda-derived Islamic State room to maneuver. It also provided a second impetus to the ideal of a caliphate. Not only were the pan-Islamists struggling against the American crusader, but they were fighting Shiite heretics — in service of the Sunni caliphate — as well. The Islamic State put into place the outcome that al Qaeda wanted in 2001, nearly 15 years later and, in addition to Syria and Iraq, with movements capable of sustained combat in other Islamic countries.

A New U.S. Strategy and Its Repercussions

Around this time, the United States was forced to change strategy. The Americans were capable of disrupting al Qaeda and destroying the Iraqi army. But the U.S. ability to occupy and pacify Iraq or Afghanistan was limited. The very factionalism that made it possible to achieve the first two goals made pacification impossible. Working with one group alienated another in an ongoing balancing act that left U.S. forces vulnerable to some faction motivated to wage war because of U.S. support for another. In Syria, where the secular government was confronting a range of secular and religious but not extremist forces, along with an emerging Islamic State, the Americans were unable to meld the factionalized non-Islamic State forces into a strategically effective force. Moreover, the United States could not make its peace with the al Assad government because of its repressive policies, and it was unable to confront the Islamic State with the forces available.

In a way, the center of the Middle East had been hollowed out and turned into a whirlpool of competing forces. Between the Lebanese and Iranian borders, the region had uncovered two things: First, it showed that the subnational forces were the actual reality of the region. Second, in obliterating the Syria-Iraq border, these forces and particularly the Islamic State had created a

core element of the caliphate — a transnational power or, more precisely, one that transcended borders.

The American strategy became an infinitely more complex variation of President Ronald Reagan's policy in the 1980s: Allow the warring forces to war. The Islamic State turned the fight into a war on Shiite heresy and on established nation states. The region is surrounded by four major powers: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. Each has approached the situation differently. Each of these nations has internal factions, but each state has been able to act in spite of that. Put differently, three of them are non-Arab powers, and the one Arab power, Saudi Arabia, is perhaps the most concerned about internal threats.

For Iran, the danger of the Islamic State is that it would recreate an effective government in Baghdad that could threaten Iran again. Thus, Tehran has maintained support for the Iraqi Shiites and for the al Assad government, while trying to limit al Assad's power.

For Saudi Arabia, which has aligned with Sunni radical forces in the past, the Islamic State represents an existential threat. Its call for a transnational Islamic movement has the potential to resonate with Saudis from the Wahhabi tradition. The Saudis, along with some other Gulf Cooperation Council members and Jordan, are afraid of Islamic State transnationalism but also of Shiite power in Iraq and Syria. Riyadh needs to contain the Islamic State without conceding the ground to the Shiites.

For the Israelis, the situation has been simultaneously outstanding and terrifying. It has been outstanding because it has pitted Israel's enemies against each other. Al Assad's government has in the past supported Hezbollah against Israel. The Islamic State represents a long-term threat to Israel. So long as they fought, Israel's security would be enhanced. The problem is that in the end someone will win in Syria, and that force might be more dangerous than anything before it, particularly if the Islamic State ideology spreads to Palestine. Ultimately, al Assad is less dangerous than the Islamic State, which shows how bad the Israeli choice is in the long run.

It is the Turks — or at least the Turkish government that suffered a setback in the recently concluded parliamentary elections — who are the most difficult to understand. They are hostile to the al Assad government — so much so that they see the Islamic State as less of a threat. There are two ways to explain their view: One is that they expect the Islamic State to be defeated by the United States in the end and that involvement in Syria would stress the Turkish political system. The other is that they might be less averse than others in the region to the Islamic State's winning. While the Turkish government has vigorously denied such charges, rumors of support to at least some factions of the Islamic State have persisted, suspicions in Western capitals linger, and alleged shipments of weaponry to unknown parties in Syria by the Turkish intelligence organization were a dominant theme in Turkey's elections. This is incomprehensible, unless the Turks see the Islamic State as a movement that they can control in the end and that is paving the way for Turkish power in the region — or unless the Turks believe that a direct confrontation would lead to a backlash from the Islamic State in Turkey itself.

The Islamic State's Role in the Region

The Islamic State represents a logical continuation of al Qaeda, which triggered both a sense of Islamic power and shaped the United States into a threat to Islam. The Islamic State created a military and political framework to exploit the situation al Qaeda created. Its military operations have been impressive, ranging from the seizure of Mosul to the taking of Ramadi and Palmyra. Islamic State fighters' flexibility on the battlefield and ability to supply large numbers of forces in combat raises the question of where they got the resources and the training.

However, the bulk of Islamic State fighters are still trapped within their cauldron, surrounded by three hostile powers and an enigma. The hostile powers collaborate, but they also compete. The Israelis and the Saudis are talking. This is not new, but for both sides there is an urgency that wasn't there in the past. The Iranian nuclear program is less important to the Americans than collaboration with Iran against the Islamic State. And the Saudis and other Gulf countries have forged an air capability used in Yemen that might be used elsewhere if needed.

It is likely that the cauldron will hold, so long as the Saudis are able to sustain their internal political stability. But the Islamic State has already spread beyond the cauldron — operating in Libya, for example. Many assume that these forces are Islamic State in name only — franchises, if you will. But the Islamic State does not behave like al Qaeda. It explicitly wants to create a caliphate, and that wish should not be dismissed. At the very least, it is operating with the kind of centralized command and control, on the strategic level, that makes it far more effective than other non-state forces we have seen.

Secularism in the Muslim world appears to be in terminal retreat. The two levels of struggle within that world are, at the top, Sunni versus Shiite, and at the base, complex and interacting factions. The Western world accepted domination of the region from the Ottomans and exercised it for almost a century. Now, the leading Western power lacks the force to pacify the Islamic world. Pacifying a billion people is beyond anyone's capability. The Islamic State has taken al Qaeda's ideology and is attempting to institutionalize it. The surrounding nations have limited options and a limited desire to collaborate. The global power lacks the resources to both defeat the Islamic State and control the insurgency that would follow. Other nations, such as Russia, are alarmed by the Islamic State's spread among their own Muslim populations.

It is interesting to note that the fall of the Soviet Union set in motion the events we are seeing here. It is also interesting to note that the apparent defeat of al Qaeda opened the door for its logical successor, the Islamic State. The question at hand, then, is whether the four regional powers can and want to control the Islamic State. And at the heart of that question is the mystery of what Turkey has in mind, particularly as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's power appears to be declining.