

TAHRIR FORUM

*The Fantasy of
Disengagement**By Thanassis Cambanis*

A generational war has engulfed the Levant. The ruination of Iraq and Syria is akin to a core meltdown within the Arab state system, with consequences that already have rocked the world: new wars flaring across the Middle East, political ferment in Turkey, a global refugee crisis, and the rise of the Islamic State group, to name just a few.

Today we can begin the sad work of taking inventory of an American presidency that aspired to a humane and humble foreign policy. President Barack Obama didn't start the Levantine conflagration—that ignoble credit belongs to his predecessor—but he has kept America fighting in Iraq and deployed forces in Syria to support a vast, billion-dollar covert proxy effort. All to little effect.

The long, horrific war that President George W. Bush launched in March 2003, with his illegal invasion of Iraq under false pretenses, has shattered the cradle of civilization beyond all recognition. During the subsequent occupation, U.S. officials dismantled the pillars of the Iraqi state, including its military and bureaucracy, and then stood by as newly empowered sectarian warlords and mob bosses tore apart the country. Many wars flared simultaneously in Iraq, some of which spread to neighboring Syria after the popular uprising sparked there in 2011.

President Obama's signal intellectual and policy contribution was his minimalist response towards the chaos left behind by Bush. American policy at turns sought to contain the implosion of Syria and the ongoing fighting in Iraq, and at others accelerated or tried to steer the conflict, often by trying to balance ethnic or sectarian militias in a manner that, perhaps inadvertently, deepened the hold of sectarian warlords.

The president's lackluster attitude has poisoned much of the serious policy conversation in Washington. His policies have spread the spurious conviction that whatever happens in the Middle East is not a core U.S. or international interest, but rather a sad and regional affair. Days before Mosul fell to ISIS, an expert with the White House's ear insisted to me that the jihadi movement was a containable local problem.

The folly of the Obama doctrine is reinforced by the conviction that violence in Mesopotamia and the Levant is neither of America's making nor America's responsibility to manage. Yet state failure in the wealthy, oil-rich, politically interconnected Arab heartland has fundamentally diminished global security—unfortunately just as some Middle East experts predicted.

What happens in Iraq doesn't stay in Iraq. Politics and war are dynamic processes. There is mirroring, learning, exporting, and knowledge sharing among all manner of actors, including authoritarian rulers, local warlords, non-state militias, and terrorist movements. The experience gained by fighters of many stripes in Iraq's first stage of civil war and anti-American resistance, from 2003 to 2006, has fed conflicts and militancy far afield in the Arab World. Today, the wars in Iraq, Syria, and surrounding the Islamic State

cannot meaningfully be considered separate conflicts, as U.S. policymakers still vainly try to do.

American policy in a fragmenting wider Middle East has systematically failed to bridge the gap between its rhetoric and realities on the ground. In principle, the Middle East has been “right-sized” on the foreign policy agenda as a midlevel interest behind global warming, trade, and China, among others. In practice, Obama’s national security and foreign policy teams have focused the plurality of their energy on the Middle East.

Yet through all this dislocating turbulence, characterized by levels of murder, death, and displacement not seen since the Second World War, President Obama has demurred that there isn’t anything more that the United States could do to cushion or even shape the partial disintegration of the Arab state system. Obama, reasonably, wanted to repair the toxic legacy of his predecessor. He was driven by negative aspirations—a desire *not* to invade more Muslim countries, not to waste lives and colossal resources in military folly, not to behave as if the military were America’s only foreign policy tool. But that does not justify his belief that the Middle East is less important than claimed by foreign policy experts, whom the president’s close adviser Ben Rhodes collectively dismisses as “the blob.” The president appears to believe that the United States cannot direct events in places like Iraq and Syria, and when it does try to steer events through military intervention, the result is a tragic parade of errors.

It’s understandable that President Obama harbored a fantasy of washing his hands of the whole mess. The United States failed to achieve its goals in Iraq and Afghanistan despite killing many people and committing a great deal of resources.

The results in Libya are more equivocal and America’s responsibility more broadly shared, but hardly make a case for successful U.S. intervention.

But the alternative to reckless interventionism cannot realistically be disengagement. The region’s conflicts implicate the United States and plenty of other foreign powers, along with the whole ethnic, sectarian, and ideological panoply of a region that, despite generations of ethnic cleansing, hosts a staggering amount of diversity. America bears heavy responsibility as Israel’s guarantor power, which inextricably ties Washington to Israel’s conflicts with Palestinians and other regional players.

Far too late in the game, Obama has learned that saying that something doesn’t matter doesn’t necessarily make it so. Efforts to cauterize the Middle East and keep it at arm’s length have proved even more destabilizing (and attention-sucking) than a full-fledged policy commitment from the get-go. On what subjects do Obama and his national security advisers spend their time? Grudgingly, the Levant and its neighborhood. Obama’s agenda since 2011 has been hogged by, to a name few, Israel’s expansionism and its conflicts with Palestinians and others; the Arab revolts; Iran, the nuclear deal and its rivalry with Saudi Arabia; and the Yemen war. Grinding all along at the heart of the unending crisis is the Levant war, which is America’s responsibility.

The fantasy of American disengagement in the Middle East is just that: a fantasy.

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