

AMERICA'S MISADVENTURES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

End Washington's Blundering, or Expect a Bloodier Mess

By Chas W. Freeman, Jr.

Two hundred and eighteen years ago, Napoleon was preparing to take Malta. His purpose was to clear an obstacle to his seizure of Egypt for revolutionary France. He was able to invade Egypt on July 1, 1798. Napoleon's campaign there and in Palestine kicked off a two-century-long effort by the West to transform the Middle East. European imperial powers and, latterly, the United States, have repeatedly sought to convert Arabs, Persians, and Turks to the secular values of the European Enlightenment, to democratize them, to impose Western models of governance on them in place of indigenous, Islamic systems, and more recently to persuade them to accept a Jewish state in their midst.

This experiment in expeditionary, transformative diplomacy has now definitively failed. The next American president will inherit a greatly diminished capacity to influence the evolution of the Middle East. Amidst the imbecilities of America's interminably farcical election season, it has proven expedient to blame this on President Barack Obama. If only he had bombed Syria, repudiated his predecessor's agreement to withdraw the U.S. military from Iraq, refused to compromise with Iran on nuclear matters, knuckled under to Benjamin Netanyahu, or whatever, the old order in the Middle East would be alive and well and the United States would still call the shots there.

But this is nonsense. America's estrangement from the Middle East derives from trends that are much deeper than the manifest deficiencies of executive and congressional leadership in Washington. America and its partners in the Middle East have developed contradictory interests and priorities. Where shared values existed at all, they have increasingly diverged. There have been massive changes in geo-economics, energy markets, power balances, demographics, religious ideologies, and attitudes toward America (not just the U.S. government). Many of these changes were

▷ U.S. Navy Seals and Polish special forces, Umm-Qasr, Iraq, March 23, 2003. *Desmond Boylan/Reuters*



catalyzed by historic American policy blunders. In the aggregate, these blunders are right up there with the French and German decisions to invade Russia and Japan's surprise attack on the United States. Their effects make current policies not just unsustainable but counterproductive.

Creating More Terrorists

Blunder number one was the failure to translate America's military triumph over Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991 into a peace with Baghdad. No effort was ever made to reconcile Iraq to the terms of its defeat. The victors instead sought to impose elaborate but previously undiscussed terms by United Nations fiat in the form of the UN Security Council Resolution 687—"the mother of all resolutions." The military basis for a renewed balance of power in the Gulf was there to be exploited. The diplomatic vision was not. The George H. W. Bush administration ended without addressing the question of how to replace war with peace in the Gulf.

Wars don't end until the militarily humiliated accept the political consequences of their defeat. Saddam gave lip service to UNSCR 687 but took it no more seriously than Netanyahu and his predecessors have taken the various Security Council resolutions that direct Israel to permit Palestinians to return to the homes from which it drove them or to withdraw from the Palestinian lands it has seized and settled. Like Israel's wars with the Arabs, America's war with Iraq went into remission but never ended. In due course, it resumed.

The United States needs to get into the habit of developing and implementing war termination strategies.

Blunder number two was the sudden abandonment in 1993 of the strategy of maintaining peace in the Persian Gulf through a balance of power. With no prior notice or explanation, the Bill Clinton administration replaced this longstanding approach with "dual containment" of both Iraq and Iran. For decades, offshore balancing had permitted the United States to sustain stability without stationing forces other than a very small naval contingent in the Gulf. When the regional balance of power was undone by the Iran-Iraq War, Washington intervened to restore it, emphasizing that once Kuwait had been liberated and Iraq cut back down to size, U.S. forces would depart.

The new policy of dual containment created a requirement for the permanent deployment of a large U.S. air and ground force in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar as well as an expanded naval presence in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. The political and socioeconomic irritants this requirement produced led directly to the founding of Al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. Dual containment was plausible as a defense of Israel against its two most potent regional adversaries, Iran and Iraq. But it made no sense at all in terms of stabilizing the Gulf.

By writing off Iraq as a balancer of Iran, dual containment also paved the way for the 2003 American experiment with regime removal in Baghdad. This rash action on the part of the United States led to the de facto realignment of Iraq with Iran, the destabilization and partition of Iraq, the destabilization and partition of Syria, the avalanche of refugees now threatening to unhinge the European Union, and the rise of the so-called Islamic State. With Iraq having fallen into the Iranian sphere of influence, there is no apparent way to return to offshore balancing. The United States is stuck in the Gulf. The political irritations this generates ensure that some in the region will continue to seek to attack the U.S. homeland or, failing that, Americans overseas.

The United States needs to find an alternative to the permanent garrisoning of the Gulf.

Blunder number three was the unthinking transformation in December 2001 of what had been a punitive expedition in Afghanistan into a long-term pacification campaign that soon became a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operation. The objectives of the NATO campaign have never been clear but appear to center on guaranteeing that there will be no Islamist government in Kabul. The engagement of European as well as American forces in this vague mission has had the unintended effect of turning the so-called “global war on terrorism” into what appears to many Muslims to be a Western global crusade against Islam and its followers. Afghanistan remains decidedly unpacified and is becoming more, not less, Islamist.

The United States needs to find ways to restore conspicuous cooperation with the world's Muslims.

Blunder number four was the inauguration on February 4, 2002—also in Afghanistan—of a campaign using missiles fired from drones to assassinate presumed opponents. This turn toward robotic warfare has evolved into a program of serial massacres from the air in a widening area of West Asia and northern Africa. It is a major factor in the metastasis of anti-Western terrorism with global reach.

What had been a U.S. problem with a few Islamist exiles resident in Afghanistan and Sudan is now a worldwide phenomenon. The terrorist movements U.S. interventions have spawned now have safe havens not just in Afghanistan, but in the now failed states of Iraq and Syria, as well as Chad, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. They also have a growing following among European Muslims and a toehold among Muslim Americans. We have flunked the test suggested by the Yoda of the Pax Americana, Donald Rumsfeld. We are creating more terrorists than we are killing.

The United States needs a strategy that does not continuously reinforce blowback.

Blunder number five was the aid to Iran implicit in the unprovoked invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. This rearranged the region to the severe strategic disadvantage of traditional U.S. strategic partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia by helping to

create an Iranian sphere of influence that includes much of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It showed the United States to be militarily mighty but geopolitically naïve and strategically incompetent. Rather than underscoring American military power, it devalued it. The U.S. invasion of Iraq also set off a sectarian struggle that continues to spread around the globe among the Muslim fourth of humanity. The U.S. occupation culminated in a “surge” of forces that entrenched a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad and that only its authors consider a victory.

The United States needs to deal with the reality and the challenges to others in the region of the Iranian sphere of influence it helped create.

Blunder number six has been to confuse the motives for terrorism with the religious rationalizations its perpetrators concoct to justify its immorality. Many of those who seek revenge for perceived injustices and humiliations at the hands of the West and Western-backed regimes in the Middle East, or who are treated as aliens in their own countries in Europe, give voice to their anger in the language of Islam. But their political grievances, not heretical Islamic excuses for the mass murders they carry out, are what drive their attempts at reprisal. Islamism is a symptom of Arab anguish and rage. It is a consequence, not a cause, of Muslim anger.

Religious ideology is, of course, important. It is a key factor in justifying hatred of those outside its self-selected community. To non-believers, arguments about who is a Jew or whether someone is a true Muslim are incomprehensible and more than a little absurd. But to the intolerant people doing the excommunicating, such debates define their political community and those who must be excluded from it. They separate friend from foe. And to those being condemned for their disbelief or alleged apostasy, the judgments imposed by this intolerance can now be a matter of life or death.

In the end, the attribution of Muslim resentment of the West to Islam is just a version of the facile thesis that “they hate us because of who we are.” This is the opiate of the ignorant. It is self-expiating denial that past and present behavior by Western powers, including the United States, might have created grievances severe enough to motivate others to seek revenge for the indignities they have experienced. It is an excuse to ignore and do nothing about the ultimate sources of Muslim rage because they are too discomfiting to bear discussion. Any attempt to review the political effects of American complicity in the oppression and dispossession of millions of Palestinians and the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths caused by U.S. sanctions, bombing campaigns, and drone warfare is ruled out of order by political correctness and cowardice.

The United States needs to work with its European allies, with Russia, and with partners in the Middle East to attack the problems that are generating terrorism, not just the theology of those who resort to it.

Blunder number seven was the adoption after the 1973 Yom Kippur War of a commitment to maintain a “qualitative military edge” for Israel over any and all potential adversaries in its region. This policy has deprived Israel of any incentive to seek security through non-military means. Why should Israel risk resting its security on reconciliation with Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors when it has been assured of long-term military supremacy over them and relieved of any concern about the political or economic consequences of using force against them?

Confidence in Israel’s qualitative military edge is now the main source of moral hazard for the Jewish state. Its effect is to encourage Israel to favor short-term territorial gains over any effort to achieve long-term security through acceptance by neighboring states, the elimination of tensions with them, and the normalization of its relations with others in its region. U.S. policy inadvertently ensured that the so-called “peace process” would always be stillborn. And so it proved to be.

Israel’s lack of concern about the consequences of its occupation and settlement of the West Bank and its siege of Gaza has facilitated its progressive abandonment of the universalist Jewish values that inspired Zionism and its consequent separation from the Jewish communities outside its elastic borders. U.S. subsidies underwrite blatant tyranny by Jewish settlers over the Muslim and Christian Arabs they have dispossessed. This is a formula for the moral and political self-delegitimization of the State of Israel, not its long-term survival. It is also a recipe for the ultimate loss by Israel of irreplaceable American political, military, and other support.

The United States needs to wean Israel off its welfare dependency and end the unconditional commitments that enable self-destructive behavior on the part of the Jewish state.

Blunder number eight has been basing U.S. policies toward the Middle East on deductive reasoning grounded in ideological fantasies and politically convenient narratives rather than on inductive reasoning and reality-based analysis. America’s misadventures cannot be excused as “intelligence errors.” They are the result of the ideological politicization of policymaking. This has enabled multiple policy errors based on wishful thinking, selective listening, and mirror-imaging. Examples include:

- The conviction, despite UN inspections and much evidence to the contrary, that Saddam’s program to develop weapons of mass destruction was ongoing, representing an imminent danger, and could only be halted by his overthrow.
- The supposition that, despite his well-documented secularism, because he was an Arab, a Muslim, and a bad guy, Saddam must be colluding with the religious fanatics of Al-Qaeda.
- The assumption that the U.S. military presence in Iraq would be short, undemanding, and inexpensive.

- The belief that the overthrow of confessional and ethnic balances would not cause the disintegration of societies like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon or ignite a wider sectarian conflict.
- The spurious attribution to people in Iraq of political attitudes and aspirations found mostly among exiles abroad.
- The ludicrous expectation that U.S. forces invading Iraq would be greeted as liberators by all but a few.
- The unshakeable presumption that Israel must want peace more than land.
- The impulse to confuse mob rule on the Arab street with a process of democratization.
- The confidence that free and fair elections would put liberals rather than Islamist nationalists in power in Arab societies like Palestine and Egypt.
- The supposition that the removal of bad guys from office, as in Libya, Yemen, or Syria, would lead to the elevation of better leaders and the flowering of peace, freedom, and domestic tranquility there.
- Imagining that dictators like Bashar Al-Assad had little popular support and could therefore be easily deposed.

I could go on but I won't. I'm sure I've made my point. Dealing with the Middle East as we prefer to imagine it rather than as it is doesn't work.

The United States needs to return to fact-based analysis and realism in its foreign policy.

Moving the Goalposts

All the blunders have been compounded by the consistent substitution of military tactics for strategy. The diplomatic success of the Iran nuclear deal aside, the policy dialogue in Washington and the 2016 presidential campaign have focused entirely on the adjustment of troop levels, whether and when to bomb things, the implications of counterinsurgency doctrine, when and how to use special forces, whether to commit troops on the ground, and the like, with nary a word about what these uses of force are to accomplish other than killing people. When presented with proposals for military action, no one asks, "And then what?"

Military campaign plans that aim at no defined political end state are violence for the sake of violence that demonstrably create more problems than they solve. Military actions that are unguided and unaccompanied by diplomacy are especially likely to do so. Think of Israel's, America's, and Saudi Arabia's campaigns in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen.

By contrast, military interventions that are limited in their objectives, scale, and duration, that end or phase down when they have achieved appropriate milestones, and that support indigenous forces that have shown their mettle on the battlefield

can succeed. Examples include the pre-Tora Bora phase of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and the first round of Russian intervention in Syria.

The objectives of what was initially conceived as a punitive raid into Afghanistan in October 2001 were (1) to dismantle Al-Qaeda and (2) to punish its Taliban hosts to ensure that “terrorists with global reach” would be denied a continuing safe haven in Afghanistan. The United States pursued these objectives by supporting mostly non-Pashtun enemies of the mostly Pashtun Taliban who had proven politico-military capabilities and staying power. A limited American and British investment of intelligence capabilities, special forces, air combat controllers, and air strikes tilted the battlefield in favor of the Northern Alliance and against the Taliban. Within a little more than two months, the Taliban had been forced out of Kabul and the last remnants of Al-Qaeda had been killed or driven from Afghanistan. America had achieved its objectives.

But instead of declaring victory and dancing off the field, we moved the goalposts. The United States launched an open-ended campaign and enlisted NATO in efforts to install a government in Kabul while building a state for it to govern, promoting feminism, and protecting poppy growers. The poppies still flourish. All else looks to be ephemeral.

Vladimir Putin’s intervention in Syria in 2015 relied for its success on ingredients similar to those in the pre-Tora Bora U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. The Russians committed a modest ration of airpower and special forces in support of a Syrian government that had amply demonstrated its survivability in the face of more than five years of Islamist efforts to take it down. The Russian campaign had clear political objectives, which it stuck to.

Moscow sought to reduce the complexities of Syria to a binary choice between life under the secular dictatorship of the Al-Assad regime and rule by Islamist fanatics. It cemented a Russian-Iranian entente. It hedged against the likelihood that the Syrian Humpty Dumpty cannot be reassembled, ensuring that, whatever happens, Russia will not lack clients in Syria or be dislodged from its bases at Tartus and Latakia. Russia succeeded in forcing the United States into a diplomatically credible peace process in which regime removal is no longer a given and Russia and Iran are recognized as essential participants. It retrained, reequipped, and restored the morale of government forces, while putting their Islamist opponents on the defensive and gaining ground against them. The campaign reduced and partially contained the growing Islamist threat to Russian domestic tranquility, while affirming Russia’s importance as a partner in combating terrorism.

Moscow also put its hands on the stopcock for the refugee flow from West Asia that threatens the survival of the European Union, underscoring Russia’s indispensable relevance to European affairs. It demonstrated its renewed military prowess and reestablished itself as a major actor in Middle Eastern affairs. And it showed that Russia could be counted upon to stand by protégés when they are at risk, drawing

an invidious contrast with the American abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. The cost of these achievements has been collateral damage to Russia's relations with Turkey, a price Moscow appears willing to pay.

But state failure in Syria continues, as it does in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. Jordan and Bahrain are under pressure. Tunisia and Turkey—once avatars of democratic Islamism—seem to be leaving democracy behind. Israel is strangling Gaza while swallowing the rest of Palestine alive. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain are in a near state of war with Iran, which is in the midst of a breakthrough in relations with Europe and Asia, if not America. Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are trying to stay out of the fight. Once the region's Arab heavyweight, Egypt now subsists on handouts from the Gulf Arabs and cowers under martial law. Sudan has been partitioned, sidelined, and ostracized by the West.

Definition of Insanity

The Middle East kaleidoscope has yet to come to rest. We can see that the region's future political geography will differ from its past and present contours. But we cannot yet say what it will look like.

“More-of-the-same” policies will almost certainly produce more of the same sort of mess we now see. What is to be done? Perhaps we should start by trying to correct some of the blunders that produced America's current conundrums. The world's reliance on energy from the Gulf has not diminished. But America's has. That gives Washington some freedom of maneuver. It should use it.

The United States needs to harness its military capabilities to diplomacy rather than the other way around. The key to this is to find a way to reenlist Iraq in support of a restored balance of power in the Gulf. That would allow Washington to reduce America's presence there to levels that avoid stimulating a hostile reaction and to return to a policy of offshore balancing.

This can only be done if Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Sunni states rediscover the differences between the varieties of Shiism in Iraqi Najaf and Iranian Qom. The Shiism of Najaf tends to be fatalistic and supportive of Iraqi nationalism. The Shiism of Qom is more assertively universalistic and activist. The Saudis and their allies need to make common cause with Shiite Iraqis as Arabs rather than castigate them as heretics. The limited normalization of Iranian relations with the West, including the United States, is an inevitability. The strategies of America's Arab partners in the region need to anticipate and hedge against this. And we need to prepare them to do so.

Such an adjustment will take some very tough love from the United States. It will require the Saudis and their allies to back away from the policies based on Salafi sectarianism they have followed for the better part of this decade and re-embrace the

tolerance that is at the heart of Islam. It will also require some measure of accommodation by them with Iran, regardless of the state of U.S.-Iranian relations. Without both a turn away from sectarianism and the achievement of a modus vivendi with Iran, the Saudis and their allies will remain on the defensive, Iraq will remain an extension of Iranian influence, and the region will remain inflamed by religious warfare. All this will spill over on America and its European allies.

Islamism is an extreme form of political Islam—a noxious ideology that invites a political retort. It has received none except in Saudi Arabia. There a concerted propaganda campaign has effectively refuted Islamist heresies. No effort has been undertaken to form a coalition to mount such a campaign on a regional basis. But such a coalition is essential to address the political challenges that Muslim extremists pose to regional stability and to the security of the West. Only the Saudis and others with credibility among Salafi Muslims are in a position to form and lead a campaign to do this. This is an instance where it makes sense for the United States to “lead from behind.”

Americans must be led to correct their counterproductive misunderstanding of Islam. Islamophobia has become as American as gun massacres. The presidential candidate of one of the two major parties has suggested banning Muslims from entry into the United States. This is reflective of national attitudes that are incompatible with the cooperation we need with Muslim partners to fight terrorist extremism. If we do not correct these attitudes, we will continue to pay not just in treasure but in blood. Lots of it.

Finally, the United States must cease to provide blank checks to partners in the region prone to misguided and counterproductive policies and actions that threaten American interests as well as their own prospects. No more Yemens. No more Gazas or Lebanons. No more military guarantees that disincentivize diplomacy aimed at achieving long-term security for Israel.

The obvious difficulty of making any of these adjustments is a measure of how far America has diverged from an effective approach to managing relations with the Middle East and how impaired Washington's ability to contribute to peace and stability there has become. The American mainstream media is credulous and parrots the official line. American politicians are devoted to narratives that bear almost no relation to the realities of the Middle East. Washington is dysfunctional. American politics is, well, you pick the word.

Frankly, the prospects that America will get its act and policies together are not good. But history will not excuse Americans for acting out Einstein's definition of insanity: doing more of the same and expecting different results. We won't get them.

This essay is adapted from remarks to the Center for the National Interest in Washington, DC on June 9, 2016.