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America’s Misadventures in the Middle East

By Chas Freeman
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“From now on,” President Donald Trump declared in his inaugural address, “it’s going to be only America first, America first!” If so, no region stands to be more affected than West Asia and North Africa—what Americans call “the Middle East.” America’s interests there are now entirely derivative rather than direct. They are a function of the self-appointed roles of the United States as the warden of world order, the guarantor of other nations’ security, the shepherd of the world economy, and the custodian of the global commons. If America is now to look out only for itself, it has little obvious reason to be much involved in the Middle East.

The United States is a secular democracy. It has no intrinsic interest in which theology rules hearts or dominates territory in the Middle East. It is not itself now dependent on energy imports from the Persian Gulf or the Maghreb. For most of the two-and-a-half centuries since their country was born, Americans kept a healthy distance from the region and were unharmed by events there. They extended their protection to specific nations in the Middle East as part of a global struggle against Soviet communism that is long past. What happens in the region no longer determines the global balance of power.

U.S. wars in the Middle East are—without exception—wars of choice. These wars have proven ruinously expensive and injurious to the civil liberties of Americans. They have poisoned American political culture with various manifestations of xenophobia. Islamophobia has transitioned naturally to anti-Semitism and other forms of racism and bigotry. In the region itself,

American military interventions have produced more anarchy than order, more terror than tranquility, more oppression than democratization, and more blowback than pacification.

More than in any other region, America's misadventures in the Middle East illustrate the need for the United States to decide whether it is the vindicator only of its own interests or the champion and protector of all the world's prosperity and security. Can America go its own way or must it keep commitments it made under different circumstances in the past? Are Americans accountable for the damage their interventions have wrought, or free to leave to others the task of remedying the miseries they helped create?

In essence, these choices come down to whether the United States needs to deploy its power on a worldwide basis or just carries on doing so because it did in the past and still can. The state of affairs in the Middle East affects America's global power. The region is where Africa, Asia, and Europe converge. It is a way station or choke point on air and shipping routes between Asia and Europe. It is where the world's energy supplies are concentrated. It is the point of origin of the three Abrahamic religions and the driver of global contention between them.

The freedom to transit the Middle East is central to the ability of the United States to project its military power around the world. Cooperative relations with the nations of the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and/or Iran are necessary to assure their facilitation of overflight for U.S. warplanes and passage through the Suez Canal by the U.S. Navy. The hostile state of U.S. relations with Iran makes Saudi Arabia and Egypt the logistical linchpins of America's worldwide military reach. If the United States remains committed to military operations all over the world, it must stay politically and militarily engaged with at least these two nations. Disengaging from them would imply a decision to greatly reduce America's global footprint and reach.

U.S. allies and partners everywhere defer to the United States in part because they count on its unique ability and demonstrated willingness to use force to assure untrammelled global access to Persian Gulf energy supplies. These constitute about 28 percent of world energy production. They are a decisive factor in fueling global prosperity. In practice, the only international defender of global access to these resources is the United States.

Fracking and horizontal drilling techniques have made the United States once again an energy exporter. Oil and gas shipments from the Persian Gulf now both complement and compete with oil and gas from America. Yet preventing the disruption of access to Persian Gulf energy is a service that the United States continues to provide free of charge to the global economy. America does not ask the principal consumers of these exports—China, the EU, India, Japan, and Korea—to assume or even share the burden of assuring their own energy security. Arguably, this deprives these countries of reasons to build navies that might rival that of the United States and thus helps to preserve America's global military primacy. But it's hard to see what other U.S. interest it now serves.

What costs and benefits would accrue to the United States from phasing in arrangements to share responsibility with others for managing threats to global security and prosperity from the Persian Gulf? Clearly, as Asian navies expanded into what has long been an almost exclusively

American operational area, the United States would lose its regional monopoly on naval power. But relieved of the burden of protecting the supply lines of others, the U.S. Navy might be freed to focus on areas and issues with more direct effects on American interests. If *“it’s going to be only America first,”* this tradeoff calls out for systematic examination.

So, of course, do America’s wars in the region. They include the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the conflicts in the Sahel that escalating combat with a disorderly jumble of transnational Islamist movements has spawned. None of these military operations is authorized by a congressional declaration of war that justifies the commitment of U.S. forces, sets parameters and objectives for their uses of force, and establishes a legal state of war. Article I, Section 8, Clause 11 of the United States Constitution requires such a declaration to make wars of choice legal. The Constitution’s assignment of the war power to the Congress is unequivocal and fundamental to the separation of powers.

Notwithstanding this, all current American wars are presidentially ordained, permitted but not forthrightly endorsed by Congress, and subject to no effective oversight by anyone other than the nation’s generals. Such is American militarism. None of these wars has a coherent purpose. In none is the United States now in a position to determine the outcome. In none is any end in sight.

Perhaps it’s time for the president to demand that the Congress step up to its responsibility under the Constitution and either declare war or, by failing to do so, make it clear that he must focus on extricating America from the unconstitutional forays into foreign quagmires he has inherited from his predecessors.

If the Congress can muster the will to reexamine the wars it has negligently tolerated, it should begin by belatedly asking how and on what terms they will conclude. What are America’s objectives? Are these objectives feasible? What would constitute success? When might it come? How much would it cost to achieve and consolidate it? Where the U.S. objective has basically come down to avoiding obvious defeat, what must be done to minimize the consequences of failure? And how are Americans to pay for the debt their ever-widening wars are running up?

Recall that, during the George W. Bush administration, the neoconservatives who launched these wars claimed that they would pay for themselves. The cost of U.S. interventions in West Asia and North Africa is now at least \$6 trillion in outlays and obligations—and counting. Infinite credit card rollovers are not a safe financial strategy for either individuals or nations. But the United States is still financing its wars by pyramiding debt.

The president and members of Congress might also usefully reconsider the pseudo-strategy the United States has adopted to deal with anti-American terrorists with global reach. Military campaign plans are a component of strategy, not a substitute for it. The thesis that “we must fight terrorists over there so we won’t have to fight them here” is an article of faith in much of the country. In practice, however, this has turned out to be about as sensible as a protracted effort to protect Americans from being stung by hornets by poking hornets’ nests. The more boots on the ground and drones in the air, the greater both the backlash and the blowback.

About 4 million Muslims have perished since 1990 ^[1] as a direct or indirect result of U.S. policies and interventions. Since the turn of the century, the death toll among the Muslims of the Middle East from the U.S. “Global War on Terror” is at least 1.3 million and perhaps as many as 2 million people, the vast majority of them civilians. Terrorists, whether home-grown or imported, are “over here” because Americans are “over there” killing, wounding, and humiliating their kin, their loved ones, and others of their faith.

The vigorous embrace of populist Islamophobia by America’s leading politicians alienates and radicalizes mainstream Muslims at home as well as abroad, multiplying the ranks of those with a passionate desire for revenge against America and its allies and protégés. It promises to deny the United States indispensable Muslim allies in combating the Jihadi backlash. As the U.S. area of counterterrorism operations expands, Islamist extremism spreads concomitantly. Many expect a further metastasis of terrorism once the so-called Islamic Caliphate loses its territorial footholds in Iraq and Syria and its followers disperse. Nothing the United States is now doing lessens this probability.

If putting “America first” is to mean anything at all, it must stand for configuring U.S. policies to “insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,” as the preamble to the Constitution of the United States prescribes. But current U.S. policies toward the Middle East raise the threat of domestic terrorism, increase the danger of foreign attack on the American homeland, foster a garrison mentality that corrodes American liberties, and pile debt on future generations of Americans. It is time to consider whether policies of restraint might not yield better results than those produced by promiscuous meddling, exuberant arms sales, and military adventurism. It is time for the United States to review existing relationships with both security partners and adversaries in the Middle East. Americans need to determine how best to reconfigure and recalibrate these relationships to serve U.S. interests.

U.S. interests themselves are also badly in need of review. The Cold War is long over. Regional rivalries between Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have replaced U.S.-Soviet contention and Arab nationalism as the drivers of events in the Middle East. Intra-Muslim sectarian warfare is spreading. Terrorism with Middle Eastern connections has become a global obsession. The role of the region’s abundant resources of oil and gas in world energy markets has diminished. Longstanding U.S. policy projects have been effectively abandoned. These include efforts to broker peace between Israelis and Palestinians, to democratize Middle Eastern societies, and to exclude Russian power from a role in the region’s affairs.

The central objective of U.S. policy in the Middle East has long been to achieve regional acceptance for the Jewish-settler state in Palestine. American diplomats have doggedly sought a political basis for a reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians that could provide sustainable security for Israel and facilitate broad Arab normalization of relations with the Jewish state.

The international community originally approved the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine as part of a proposed partition of Palestine into two states ^[2]. After decades of expansion, Israel has successfully precluded a two-state resolution of its conflict with its captive Arab populations.

There is now *de facto* a single state in Palestine. A government that is democratically elected by Israeli Jews exercises various degrees of tyranny over Muslim and Christian Arabs. This is a formula that assures continuing Palestinian resistance, the alienation of the world's nearly two billion Muslims from Israel, and the corrosion of both democracy and traditional Jewish values in Israel.

The Jewish state has evolved since its founding. It has left behind it both the humanism that inspired Zionism and the universal moral precepts traditionally espoused by Judaism. The perception that Israel no longer shares values it once aspired to exemplify is increasing its international isolation, especially from Jews in Europe and the United States. But American diplomacy no longer even pretends to seek to halt Israel's triumphant march toward existential implosion despite the obvious negative consequences of this for the security and international influence of the United States.

Regional rivalries have somewhat eroded the determination of Arab states to keep their public distance from Israel. Saudi Arabia and some other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) share Israel's fear of Iran and its policies. This has provided a basis for an increasingly overt anti-Iranian intelligence partnership. It has also led to cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia to manipulate U.S. politics so as to hamstring any American impulse to pursue rapprochement with Iran. But Israeli Jewish racism, cruelty to captive Arab populations^[3], and relentless hate-filled propaganda against Islam impart a moral taint that makes normal relations with Israel anathema to most Muslims. These inhumane aspects of Israeli behavior provide a potential basis for an otherwise-unimaginable Arab, Persian, and Turkish united front against the Jewish state.

American indifference to the human-rights violations that are integral to Israel's despotic rule over Palestinian Arabs has added to longstanding doubts about the sincerity of the American commitment to human rights and democracy. Such doubts are, of course, far from new. There have been many instances in which the United States transgressed its own values abroad by supporting dictatorships or seeking the overthrow of elected regimes it saw as problematic. In the Middle East, the list begins with the ousting of the Mossadegh government in Iran in 1953 and concludes with the overthrow of the Hamas government in Palestine in 2006 and the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt in 2013.

But there has never been any doubt about the ideological sincerity and dedication of the NGOs and individuals engaged in democracy and human-rights promotion. In recent years, Egypt, Israel, and some other Middle Eastern countries have inadvertently paid tribute to the effectiveness of NGO advocacy of democratic norms by passing laws and regulations banning them from either engaging in it or supporting local NGOs that do so. Now, judging by the president's proposed budget cuts downgrading non-military instruments of statecraft, both uppity democrats and sordid authoritarians abroad can rest easy. America is going out of business as a values exporter, whether by means of peaceful persuasion or by force.

Meanwhile, after a few decades' vacation, Russia has elbowed aside the United States as the most influential external power in the Levant. It did this with skillful diplomacy, supported by a very limited deployment of its armed forces to Syria. Russian military intervention made

common cause with Iran and Hizbullah as well as the Shiite regime in Baghdad, reinvigorated the Syrian government's armed forces, and rolled back its Islamist and Western-supported insurgent enemies. In the process, it simplified the political choice in Syria to one between secular autocracy and religious tyranny. (Which would you prefer, an irreligious dictatorship or a fanatic theocracy?) And it has brought the war in Syria to the beginning of its end. Russian intervention has finally made credible a peace process incorporating all factions with power on the ground in Syria, including the Assad government. But in keeping with Washington's new disdain for diplomacy, the United States is not part of this effort.

Moscow's willingness to stand by President Asad has been calculated to show all in the Middle East that, unlike the United States (which readily abandoned Hosni Mubarak in Egypt), Russia can be counted upon steadfastly to back its protégés. Russia has test-driven its new weapons systems in Syria, showing them off to prospective purchasers. In both Syria and Libya, it has made itself part of the solution to Europe's refugee crisis.

Moscow has built a quasi-alliance with Tehran against Sunni extremism. After a bad start with Turkey, it has worked out an entente (a limited partnership) with Ankara, undercutting Turkey's alliances with both Washington and Riyadh. Russia's achievements are a potent reminder that, when used in support of diplomacy and well-defined political objectives, commitments of force do not have to be overwhelming to be effective, as the "Powell Doctrine" in the United States asserts.

What is the hierarchy of U.S. interests in the Middle East in the new circumstances? It can no longer be headed by the quixotic objective of making peace between Israelis and Palestinians. It must consider the consequences for the United States as well as Israel and its Arab and Persian enemies of the end of hopes for peace and Israel's increasing alienation from the international community. It must incorporate a reaction to the putative nuclear arms and undeniably real ballistic missile races between Iran and Israel. It must recognize and deal with the danger that this competition will drive others in the Middle East to acquire nuclear weapons. It must inform an American response to the perils and opportunities presented by Russo-Iranian cooperation against Jihadism. It must address the rise of Iranian influence in the region and the consequences of the escalating politico-military and ideological rivalry between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC that this is driving. It must realistically assess and exploit the implications for the United States of the opening for Arab-Israeli entente this rivalry has created.

A ranked order of U.S. interests in the Middle East must acknowledge the region's centrality to global power projection by the United States. It must provide criteria for assessing the costs and benefits of close association or antagonism with the governments of significant local powers, like those of Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, and the UAE. It must take a hard look in particular at the advantages as well as the costs of better relations with Iran.

It must consider the benefits of trade with the countries of the Middle East, including the importance of weapons sales to Arab countries to sustaining the defense industrial base in the United States. It must address the impact of the return of Russia and Turkey to active involvement in the region's affairs. Formulating policies that deal with these multiple complexities will require focus and determination as well as strategic vision and diplomatic skill.

Over the course of decades, Israel has systematically eliminated alternatives to continued Jewish oppression or eventual expulsion of the non-Jewish inhabitants of all of the Holy Land. It has discredited the “peace process” and left no room for diplomacy. It has made brokering friendly relations between the “Jewish state” and its neighbors practically infeasible. Israel’s behavior is delegitimizing it and its policies, both in the region and internationally, while devaluing the regional and global reputation of the United States.

There is no military answer to these quandaries. It is a waste of time and money to pretend that U.S. gifts of weapons and money to Israel can eventually provide one. But it is difficult to see any opening for diplomacy as long as U.S. taxpayers continue to make it possible for Israel’s government to pursue policies it finds electorally expedient, despite their counterproductivity.

No one now believes that America has the wisdom, empathy, or objectivity to craft a peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Washington is justifiably regarded as the principal enabler of Israel’s policies, including its defiance of international law, its rejection of Arab peace initiatives, its militarism, and its repeated assaults on Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. The United States has been able to sustain close relations with Arab states in the past despite its close ties to Israel because it has been able to present itself as devoted to making peace between Palestinians and Israelis. It can no longer credibly do so. Sadly for all concerned, peace in the Holy Land is now a diplomatic write-off. This debilitates American prestige and significantly diminishes the clout of the United States not just in the region but more widely.

It is in everyone’s interest to limit nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Israel currently has a nuclear monopoly there. The United States does not find that threatening. Others understandably do. No policy that ignores this reality can hope to do more than delay others in the region from offsetting Israel’s nuclear arsenal with their own similar deterrents.

The taboos of domestic U.S. politics can and often do obscure foreign realities. They cannot erase them. To the extent that other countries fear Israeli or U.S. attack, on the model of the unprovoked 2003 American invasion of Iraq, their incentive to develop their own nuclear deterrent capabilities is increased. The United States must either find a way to assuage these threat perceptions or be prepared to accept that others in the region will copy Israel by eventually going nuclear.

The principal beneficiary of U.S. military interventions and Israel’s attacks on its neighbors in the Middle East in recent decades has been Iran. The American overthrow of the Taliban and Ba`ath regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq removed the most powerful threats to the security of the Islamic Republic. The U.S. Army then installed a pro-Iranian government in Baghdad. Israel’s 2006 assault on Lebanon gave Iran’s ally, Hizbullah, a hammerlock on Lebanese politics. Its several massacres of Palestinians of Gaza have left them dependent on Iranian support. If curbing Iranian influence is a valid policy objective of the United States, the Trump administration must find new policies to replace those it inherited. Doing this will require insisting that Israel take American interests, not just its own (as it sees them), into account as it acts.

A common concern about Iran has driven Israel, Saudi Arabia, and some other Arab states toward ententes (limited partnerships for limited purposes, perhaps for limited periods of time). On their face, these partnerships are in the American interest. But with no U.S. participation in them, will they support U.S. interests? They could instead drag America into wars it does not want and cannot sustain.

This uncertainty demands candid private dialogue with regional capitals. The Saudi and Emirati-led war in Yemen is a relevant example of this problem. So is potential Saudi facilitation of an Israeli assault on Iran. Iran, allied Shiite militias in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, and Russia seem to be coming together in a loose coalition to counter Israel, Sunni Islamism, and the United States. Such a division of the Middle East would place the United States perpetually in harm's way for interests not its own.

Relations between the states and non-state actors in the Middle East are complex. Imagining that any participant in the region's politics is either all good or all bad is a costly error. The relevant question is not the character of regimes but the extent to which they share specific interests coinciding with those of the United States. If they do, it is a mistake for America to rule out cooperation with them. If their interests are opposed to those of the United States, it is foolish to pretend that they are "allies" and, as such, entitled to across-the-board American support.

The United States must now reckon not just with politico-military dynamics within the Middle East but with the rising influence of countries on its periphery, like Turkey and Russia, and others farther away, like China and India. The Islamist Jihadi threat spans the Muslim world, four-fifths of which is non-Arab. The primary victims of its violent politics are Muslims. But intra-Muslim sectarian strife is more and more spilling over into the non-Muslim world.

This gives the international community a vital interest in containing and extinguishing Islamist extremism. To do so requires addressing it on the political and ideological level as well as through law enforcement and military operations. Military operations alone have been and will continue to be ineffective.

Without the cooperation of key Muslim societies—both Shiite and Sunni—no strategy combining political, law enforcement, and military actions is feasible. Without coordination between the United States, Russia, China, the European Union (EU), India, and religiously authoritative Muslim allies, no effective strategy can be carried out. Without the United States or the leadership it has until recently provided, it is hard to see how such coordination can be realized.

To sum up, Americans have arrived at a moment in which the Middle East they have long imagined no longer exists and the actions they are taking no longer yield the intended results. A fundamental reexamination of the premises and purposes of U.S. policies in the region is in order. The complexities of such a review would be formidable. But policies based on past rather than current realities will only get the countries of the Middle East and the United States into even more trouble than they are already in. American policies in the Middle East, as elsewhere, must spring from unflinching analysis of the current situation, be disciplined by a clear-eyed view of American interests, and put those interests—not those of others—first.

