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American Death Spiral in the Middle East

By Tom Engelhardt

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When Barack Obama took office, the sky was the limit in the Greater Middle East. After all, it seemed the U.S. had hit rock bottom. President Bush had set the region aflame with a raging debacle in Iraq, a sputtering conflict in Afghanistan, and a low-level drone war in Pakistan. The outgoing president was wildly unpopular in the region and it was hard to imagine just what the new administration could do to make the situation worse.

For all his foreign policy faults, Bush had even left his successor with an ace in the hole. Obama had campaigned on ending the Iraq War and Bush was kind enough to negotiate the terms for him before he left office. All the new president had to do was sit back and reap the rewards.

Almost five years later, the administration surely wishes it had a time machine to take America back to the Bush days when Iraq was convulsed by a civil war, the war in Afghanistan was largely forgotten, Egypt and Tunisia were under the thumbs of American-backed tyrants, and Syria and Libya were controlled by detested but stable dictators.

What seemed at the time to be a blood-soaked hell must look more like the halcyon days to the Obama administration, whose national security team now seems content to limp through the remainder of the president's second term with fingers crossed, hoping desperately that they won't stumble, bumble, stagger, slide, or inadvertently leap into yet another foreign policy fiasco

in the region. Today, as Bob Dreyfuss indicates, the administration finds itself adrift in the Greater Middle East, chastened by a series of its own foreign policy flubs, stumbles, and mini-disasters, as well as by governments that seem increasingly beyond its power or ability to control, coerce, or cajole. The only country in the region that seems to bear much resemblance to its pre-Obama self is Iraq, where violence has reached its highest level in half a decade and suicide and car bombings, assassinations, kidnappings, and death threats are creeping ever closer to Bush-era levels.

Today, TomDispatch regular and *Nation* magazine stalwart Bob Dreyfuss wades knee deep in the Big Muddy in the Middle East to offer a vivid portrait of an Obama administration in remarkable disarray. ~ *Nick Turse*

A Field Guide to Losing Friends, Influencing No One, and Alienating the Middle East By Bob Dreyfuss

Put in context, the simultaneous raids in Libya and Somalia last month, targeting an alleged al-Qaeda fugitive and an alleged kingpin of the al-Shabab Islamist movement, were less a sign of America's awesome might than two minor exceptions that proved an emerging rule: namely, that the power, prestige, and influence of the United States in the broader Middle East and its ability to shape events there is in a death spiral.

Twelve years after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban and a decade after the misguided invasion of Iraq – both designed to consolidate and expand America's regional clout by removing adversaries – Washington's actual standing in country after country, including its chief allies in the region, has never been weaker. Though President Obama can order raids virtually anywhere using Special Operations forces, and though he can strike willy-nilly in targeted killing actions by calling in the Predator and Reaper drones, he has become the Rodney Dangerfield of the Middle East. Not only does no one there respect the United States, but no one really fears it, either – and increasingly, no one pays it any mind at all.

There are plenty of reasons why America's previously unchallenged hegemony in the Middle East is in free fall. The disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq generated anti-American fervor in the streets and in the elites. America's economic crisis since 2008 has convinced many that the United States no longer has the wherewithal to sustain an imperial presence. The Arab Spring, for all its ups and downs, has challenged the status quo everywhere, leading to enormous uncertainty while empowering political forces unwilling to march in lockstep with Washington. In addition, oil-consuming nations like China and India have become more engaged with their suppliers, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. The result: throughout the region, things are fast becoming unglued for the United States.

Its two closest allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are sullenly hostile, routinely ignore Obama's advice, and openly oppose American policies. Iraq and Afghanistan, one formerly occupied and one about to be evacuated, are led, respectively, by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, an inflexible sectarian Shiite closely tied to Iran, and President Hamid Karzai, a corrupt, mercurial leader who periodically threatens to join the Taliban. In Egypt, three successive regimes – those of President

Hosni Mubarak, Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the chieftains of the July 2013 military coup – have insouciantly flouted U.S. wishes.

Turkey, ostensibly a NATO ally but led by a quirky Islamist, is miffed over Obama's back-and-forth policy in Syria and has shocked the U.S. by deciding to buy a non-NATO-compatible missile defense system from China. Libya, Somalia, and Yemen have little or no government at all. They have essentially devolved into a mosaic of armed gangs, many implacably opposed to the United States.

This downward spiral has hardly escaped attention. In a recent address to the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Chas Freeman, the former American ambassador to Saudi Arabia, described it in some detail. "We have lost intellectual command and practical control of the many situations unfolding there," said Freeman, whose nomination by Obama in 2009 to serve as head of the National Intelligence Council was shot down by the Israel Lobby. "We must acknowledge the reality that we no longer have or can expect to have the clout we once did in the region."

In an editorial on October 29th, the *New York Times* ruefully concluded: "It is not every day that America finds itself facing open rebellion from its allies, yet that is what is happening with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel." And in a front-page story on the administration's internal deliberations, the *Times's* Mark Landler reported that, over the summer, the White House had decided to scale back its role in the Middle East because many objectives "lie outside [its] reach," and henceforth would adopt a "more modest strategy" in the region.

Perhaps the most profound irony embedded in Washington's current predicament is this: Iran, for decades the supposed epicenter of anti-Americanism in the region, is the country where the United States has perhaps its last opportunity to salvage its position. If Washington and Tehran can negotiate a détente – and it's a big if, given the domestic political power of hawks in both countries – that accord might go a long way toward stabilizing Washington's regional credibility.

Debacle in Syria

Let's begin our survey of America's Greater Middle Eastern fecklessness with Exhibit A: Syria. It is there, where a movement to oust President Bashar al-Assad devolved into a civil war, that the United States has demonstrated its utter inability to guide events. Back in the summer of 2011 – at the very dawn of the conflict – Obama demanded that Assad step down. There was only one problem: short of an Iraq-style invasion of Syria, he had no power to make that happen. Assad promptly called his bluff, escalated the conflict, and rallied support from Russia and Iran. Obama's clarion call for his resignation only made things worse by convincing Syrian rebels that the United States would come to their aid.

A year later, Obama drew a "red line" in the sand, suggesting that any use of chemical weapons by Syrian forces would precipitate a U.S. military response. Again Assad ignored him, and many hundreds of civilians were gassed to death in multiple uses of the dreaded weapons.

The crowning catastrophe of Obama's Syria policy came when he threatened a devastating strike on Assad's military facilities using Tomahawk cruise missiles and other weaponry. Instead of finding himself leading a George W. Bush-style "coalition of the willing" with domestic support, Obama watched as allies scattered, including the usually reliable British and the Arab League. At home, political support was nearly nil and evaporated from there. Polls showed Americans overwhelmingly opposed to a war with or attack on Syria.

When, in desperation, the president appealed to Congress for a resolution to authorize the use of military force against that country, the White House found (to its surprise) that Congress, which normally rubber-stamps such proposals, would have none of it. Paralyzed, reluctant to choose between backing down and striking Syria by presidential fiat, Obama was rescued in humiliating fashion by a proposal from Syria's chief ally, Russia, to dismantle and destroy that country's chemical weapons arsenal.

Adding insult to injury, as Secretary of State John Kerry scrambles to organize a long-postponed peace conference in Geneva aimed at reaching a political settlement of the civil war, he is faced with a sad paradox: while the Syrian government has agreed to attend the Geneva meeting, also sponsored by Russia, America's allies, the anti-Assad rebels, have flatly refused to go.

Laughingstock in Egypt

Don't think for a second that Washington's ineffectiveness stops with the ongoing Syrian fiasco.

Next door, in a country whose government was installed by the United States after the 2003 invasion, the Obama administration notoriously failed to convince the Iraqis to allow even a small contingent of American troops to remain there past 2011. Since then, that country has moved ever more firmly into Iran's orbit and has virtually broken with Washington over Syria.

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, Shiite-led Iraq has joined Shiite Iran in supporting Assad, whose ruling minority Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shiism. There have been widespread reports that pro-Assad Iraqi Shiite militias are traveling to Syria, presumably with the support or at least acquiescence of the government. Ignoring Washington's entreaties, it has also allowed Iran to conduct a virtual Berlin Airlift-style aerial resupply effort for Syria's armed forces through Iraqi air space. Last month, in an appearance before the Council on Foreign Relations in New York during the United Nations General Assembly session, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari undiplomatically warned Obama that his government stands against the U.S. decision – taken in a secret presidential finding in April and only made public last summer – to provide arms to Syria's rebels. ("We oppose providing military assistance to any [Syrian] rebel groups.")

Meanwhile, Washington is also flailing in its policy toward Egypt, where the Obama administration has been singularly hapless. In a rare feat, it has managed to anger and alienate every conceivable faction in that politically divided country. In July, when Egypt's military ousted President Mohammad Morsi and violently clamped down on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Obama administration made itself look ridiculous to Egyptians (and to the rest of the Middle East) by refusing to call what happened a *coup d'état*, since under U.S. law that would have meant suspending aid to the Egyptian military.

As it happened, however, American aid figured little in the calculations of Egypt's new military leaders. The reason was simple enough: Saudi Arabia and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, bitter opponents of the Morsi government, applauded the coup and poured at least \$12 billion in cash into the country's near-empty coffers. In the end, making no one happy, the administration tried to split the difference: Obama declared that he would suspend the delivery of some big-ticket military items like Apache attack helicopters, Harpoon missiles, M1-A1 tank parts, and F-16 fighter planes, but let other aid to the military continue, including counterterrorism assistance and the sale of border security items. Such a split decision only served to underscore the administration's lack of leverage in Cairo. Meanwhile, there are reports that Egypt's new rulers may turn to Russia for arms in open defiance of a horrified Washington's wishes.

Saudi and Israeli Punching Bag

The most surprising defection from the pro-American coalition in the Middle East is, however, Saudi Arabia. In part, that kingdom's erratic behavior may result from a growing awareness among its ultraconservative, kleptocratic princelings that they face an increasingly uncertain future. Christopher Davidson's new book, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, outlines the many pressures building on the country.

One significant cause of instability, claims Davidson, is the "existence of substantial Western military bases on the Arabian Peninsula, [which are considered] an affront to Islam and to national sovereignty." For decades, such an American military presence in the region provided a security blanket for the Saudi royals, making the country a virtual U.S. protectorate. Now, amid the turmoil that has followed the war in Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the rise of an assertive Iran, Saudi Arabia isn't sure which way to turn, or whether the United States is friend or foe.

Since 2003, the Saudi rulers have found themselves increasingly unhappy with American policy. Riyadh, the area's chief Sunni power, was apoplectic when the United States toppled Iraq's Sunni leader Saddam Hussein and allowed Iran to vastly increase its influence in Baghdad. In 2011, the Saudi royal family blamed Washington for not doing more to prevent the collapse of the conservative and pro-Saudi Mubarak government in Egypt.

Now, the Saudis are on the verge of a complete break over Washington's policies toward Syria and Iran. As the chief backers of the rebels in Syria, they were dismayed when Obama chose not to bomb military sites around Damascus. Because it views Iran through the lens of a regional Sunni-Shiite struggle for dominance, it is no less dismayed by the possible emergence of a U.S.-Iran accord from renewed negotiations over that country's nuclear program.

To express its pique, its foreign minister abruptly canceled his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September, shocking U.N. members. Then, adding insult to injury, Saudi Arabia turned down a prestigious seat on the Security Council, a post for which it had long campaigned. "Upset at President Barack Obama's policies on Iran and Syria," reported Reuters, "members of Saudi Arabia's ruling family are threatening a rift with the United States that could take the alliance between Washington and the kingdom to its lowest point in years."

That news service quoted Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, as saying that his country was on the verge of a "major shift" in its relations with the U.S. Former head of Saudi intelligence Prince Turki al-Faisal lambasted America's Syria policy this way: "The current charade of international control over Bashar's chemical arsenal would be funny if it were not so blatantly perfidious. [It is] designed not only to give Mr. Obama an opportunity to back down [from military strikes], but also to help Assad to butcher his people."

This is shocking stuff from America's second most reliable ally in the region. As for reliable ally number one, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has visibly decided to be anything but a cooperative partner in the region, making Obama's job more difficult at every turn. Since 2009, he has gleefully defied the American president, starting with his refusal to impose a freeze on illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank when specifically asked to do so by the president at the start of his first term. Meanwhile, most of the world has spent the past half-decade on tenterhooks over the possibility that his country might actually launch a much-threatened military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Since Hassan Rouhani was elected president of Iran and indicated his interest in reorienting policy to make a deal with the Western powers over its nuclear program, Israeli statements have become ever more shrill. In a September speech to the U.N. General Assembly, for instance, Netanyahu rolled out extreme rhetoric, claiming that Israel is "challenged by a nuclear-armed Iran that seeks our destruction." This despite the fact that Iran possesses no nuclear weapons, has enriched not an ounce of uranium to weapons-grade level, and has probably not mastered the technology to manufacture a bomb. According to American intelligence reports, it has not yet even militarized its nuclear research.

Netanyahu's speech was so full of hyperbole that observers concluded Israel was isolating itself from the rest of the world. "He was so anxious to make everything look as negative as possible he actually pushed the limits of credibility," said Gary Sick, a former senior official in the Carter administration and an Iran expert. "He did himself harm by his exaggerations."

Iran: Obama's Ironic Beacon of Hope

Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are fearful that the Middle Eastern balance of power could be tipped against them if the United States and Iran are able to strike a deal. Seeking to throw the proverbial monkey wrench into the talks between Iran, the U.S., and the P5+1 powers (the permanent members of the U.N. security Council plus Germany), Israel has put forward a series of demands that go far beyond anything Iran would accept, or that the other countries would go along with. Before supporting the removal of international economic sanctions against Iran, Israel wants that country to suspend all enrichment of uranium, shut down its nuclear facilities, not be allowed any centrifuges to enrich uranium, abandon the heavy-water plant it is constructing to produce plutonium, permanently close its fortified underground installation at Fordo, and ship its stockpile of enriched uranium out of the country.

In contrast, it's widely believed that the United States is ready to allow Iran to continue to enrich uranium, maintain some of its existing facilities, and retain a partial stockpile of enriched

uranium for fuel under stricter and more intrusive inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Ironically, a U.S.-Iran détente is the one thing that could slow down or reverse the death spiral of American influence in the region. Iran, for instance, could be helpful in convincing President Assad of Syria to leave office in 2014, in advance of elections there, if radical Sunni Islamic organizations, including allies of al-Qaeda, are suppressed. Enormously influential in Afghanistan, Iran could also help stabilize that country after the departure of U.S. combat forces in 2014. And it could be enlisted to work alongside the United States and regional powers to stabilize Iraq.

More broadly, a U.S.-Iran entente might lead to a gradual de-escalation of the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, including its huge naval forces, bases, and other facilities in Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. It's even conceivable that Iran could be persuaded to join other regional and global powers in seeking a just and lasting negotiated deal between Israel and the Palestinians. The United States and Iran have a number of common interests, including opposing al-Qaeda-style terrorism and cracking down on drug smuggling.

Of course, such a deal will be exceedingly difficult to nail down, if for no other reason than that the hardliners in both countries are determined to prevent it.

Right now, imagine the Obama administration as one of those vaudeville acts that keep a dozen plates spinning atop vibrating poles. At just this moment in the Middle East, those "plates" are tipping in every direction. There's still time to prevent them all from crashing to the ground, but it would take a masterful effort from the White House – and it's far from clear that anyone there is up to the task.