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The Anxieties of Empire

The US Hastens Its Own Decline and Israel's Too

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There are “get-out-of-jail-free” cards that come with superpower status, but they don’t always work.

Still, it is better to be a superpower than to be dependent on one as those get-out-of-jail-free cards lose their value.

This is why, bad as things now are in the Land of the Free, in the Promised Land they are worse.

The whole world therefore has cause to worry. Hell hath no more dangerous peril than a superpower in decline – except perhaps a declining superpower’s dependent.

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The United States can and does get away with murder – many times over, and with lesser and greater crimes as well – for two main reasons.

First: because it has the mightiest military in the history of the world. Keeping that infernal juggernaut up and running costs more than all the rest of the world's armed forces put together.

This does not mean that America can win all the wars it fights. Quite the contrary – witness the Bush-Obama wars that have, by now, been going on for nearly a decade and a half.

Those wars were – or soon turned into — what “defense intellectuals” and their uniformed counterparts call “asymmetrical.” In plain language, this means that they are guerilla wars fought in cities, deserts, and mountain ranges. The Goliaths of the world have always had trouble with guerilla wars.

But the American military also has a problem fighting conventional armies. In a nuclear age, where there is the prospect of mutual annihilation, the wars America fights – or threatens to fight — are necessarily self-limiting. In these circumstances, less can be more; and, beyond a certain threshold, more and less can not matter at all.

Even when the United States does prevail against the armies of other states – as in Iraq at first, before George Bush declared the “mission accomplished” – an enduring victory can still be out of reach.

Since most of the taxpayer money that finds its way into the coffers of the military-industrial-national security state complex goes for weapons, not personnel, the United States doesn't have enough cannon fodder to police its conquests indefinitely. Therefore, it cannot always prevail when overt hostilities wind down.

For that, those “boots on the ground” that we hear so much about are indispensable.

But they are hard to come by. Even in times when, for the vast majority of Americans, economic opportunities are effectively nil, there aren't enough economic conscripts to keep an occupation going; and money to pay all the troops that would be needed isn't available in any case.

Mercenaries can't make up for the shortfall; and not just because, again, there aren't enough of them. Occupations are not like customer service centers; they are a lot harder to outsource.

What then does the U.S. gain by being the mightiest military power in the history of the world? The short answer is: it gains the ability to wreak havoc wherever it pleases.

And it gains opportunities to bring itself to grief, by becoming bogged down in endless wars it can never win. Lately, Obama has been taking full advantage of those opportunities.

He ought to know better. Defeat is all but inevitable in the kinds of asymmetrical wars the United States has lately been fighting.

Militias, backed by local populations, fighting on their home turf against a poorly motivated aggressor, punch way beyond their weight. David beats Goliath — time and again.

The Biblical David didn't just defeat Goliath; he annihilated him. The American Goliath doesn't get annihilated. That is what those get-out-of-jail-free cards are good for.

The troops the Pentagon sends might as well take "born to lose" for a motto, but, with its grotesquely overblown budget, the American war machine has enough depth to withstand defeat time and again, and still to bounce back – effectively undiminished.

This is why the fighting doesn't stop when America loses, and it is why "the coalition of the willing" that Team Obama is now patching together will stay engaged in Syria and Iraq forever – or until the political will to keep the insanity going expires.

America's role in Iraq had been subsiding, though not as much as Obama, the Peace laureate, would have had the world believe. And, thanks to Russian diplomacy, Obama managed to stay out of Syria last year, even after the "red line" he had mindlessly drawn had apparently been crossed.

But that was then – before his disengagement charade in Iraq fell apart, and before Republicans and even more rabid Clintonites than he in his own party began breathing down the Commander-in-Chief's throat. In these circumstances, and with elections looming, Obama found it expedient to stoke up the flames.

In the short run, only the Congress could have stopped him. But Congress is and long has been a national disgrace.

Obama apologists blame Congressional Republicans for impeding each and every milquetoast initiative their man attempts. They have a point. But when the President starts doing "stupid shit," as he himself called the sort of thing he is now doing, Republicans jump on board.

And so, with Syria, Obama finally has what he has been yearning for all these years: a bipartisan consensus.

Shame on Congress, and especially on Congressional Democrats! Hardly any of them have the courage or plain good sense to defy their leader.

It is the same everywhere. As global capital's power grows, the people's power goes missing. There is now even a name for this phenomenon: it is called a "democracy deficit."

In such an environment, wars thrive.

The problem is not that wars are always good for business, though they generally are. What matters to the miscreants who call the shots is just that the people, the rulers in genuine democracies, are disempowered and, wherever possible, shut out.

Increasingly, they are getting their way. Therefore, voters nowadays everywhere have little say over what their governments do. The economic conscripts whom those governments put in harm's way have even less. Their victims have none at all.

And so, the United States and other Western countries get a pass, and the peoples of the Middle East bear the brunt of the insanity that results.

America gets a pass too because (slightly) lesser powers that could cut the superpower down to size – Russia and China, especially – are comfortable with the status quo, at least for the time being. Their governments are OK with it because their leading capitalists like it that way.

It doesn't help either that the EU has gone invertebrate. How different it now is from the days when LBJ and Nixon were unable to enlist European support for America's war in Vietnam. Back then, they couldn't even get the UK to go along.

And then there was De Gaulle; a man of many faults, who nevertheless pulled France out of NATO, sort of. Now, in France, there is not even a Jacques Chirac raining on Obama's parade. How pathetic is that!

The reasons they are all so willing to enable America to ride roughshod over the world are mainly economic. But, putting it that way gives the enablers too much credit. Were they to do what is best for themselves, they would be less accommodating.

However, they don't do what is best; they do what is easiest. In the Age of Obama, cowardice and inertia trump calculations of self-interest.

By withholding natural gas and other energy resources from Europe, Russia could bring NATO to its knees. If only it would! Originally, a Cold War concoction, NATO has long been nothing more than a league of the American empire's vassal states.

It outlived the demise of the Soviet Union because it is useful to the empire in ways that the United Nations, with its newly minted and not always properly "aligned" states, can never be. NATO's abolition should be high on the progressive agenda.

It is no secret too that (formerly Red) China could easily overthrow the (formerly) Almighty Dollar, the main basis for America's continuing economic supremacy. All it would have to do is dump its holdings of American bonds and currency and other financial instruments.

The other BRICS countries – Brazil, India and South Africa – along with other "emerging" economies could do the same, and they would all be better off for it – in due course.

Obama has lately joined the chorus that bloviates about "American exceptionalism." In other words, he has taken to blathering nonsense. However, there really is something exceptional about the United States.

Were the BRICS countries and others to put the dollar in its rightful place, what is truly exceptional about America would become obvious to anyone who is not willfully blind: it is its ability to print money, virtually without constraint, to fund its wars and to cover its overreaching.

This is a gift that the rest of the world bestows. From an economic point of view, it no longer makes any sense. The BRICS countries and others could therefore give America its comeuppance at any time.

But this is not about to happen because they too are undemocratic and corrupt, and because in the short run at least, changing the status quo would cost their ruling classes.

Will this still be the case if and when U.S. policy makers finally do get their “pivot towards Asia?” No one can say for sure, but it is not out of the question that the international class solidarities that currently sustain the dollar’s supremacy will collapse. If and when that happens, watch out Treasury Department, and Wall Street beware!

For the time being, though, America gets to keep its get-out-of-jail-free cards. There is a price for this, however: the economic wellbeing of the United States, and its capacity to dominate the world, now depend upon the kindness and forbearance of America’s potential enemies.

Does any of this matter to the policy makers at Foggy Bottom and the White House? If so, they show little sign of it. Instead, they play their get-out-of-jail-free cards with reckless abandon, seemingly oblivious to the changing world around them.

But even if they truly are in denial about the dangers ahead, the reality registers. This is why the Age of Obama is an Age of Anxiety, a time for acting out.

It is a risky business – picking fights with Russia and China and destabilizing the Muslim “east.” It is foolish too, in countless ways. And the consequences for the “homeland,” as we now call it, have been deplorable.

America was once among the world’s leading forces working to secure Franklin Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” at home and around the world: freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship (or not) in whatever way one wants, freedom from want, and, above all, freedom from fear.

But as the republic became a worldwide empire and then the world’s only superpower, and as its overripe capitalist economy began to falter, it found that it had to give up on that; not in word — the propaganda has never wavered — but in deed.

In deed, America is no longer the land of liberty that it used to be. It is a land of 24/7 surveillance, where the rule of law is often and easily shunted aside.

Because no one in Congress or in the courts will do anything to hold Obama’s minions accountable, they, like George Bush’s before them, are hard at work undoing longstanding rights and liberties with virtual impunity.

This is not about to change any time soon. Wonderful as it will be to soon see the back of Eric Holder, he is sure to be replaced by more of the same.

The authorities now have the means in place to control a rebellious citizenry, if and when people wake up and rise to the occasion.

But their situation is far from comfortable, nevertheless. The military power they are so eager to unleash is often ill suited for the purposes for which they deploy it; and America's real strength, its soft power, the power of a good example, is diminished day by day.

It is no wonder that they are anxious.

Moreover, as the empire they steward hastens its own demise, their prerogatives and immunities decline correspondingly. Get-out-of-jail-free cards don't come stamped with expiration dates, but their efficacy does diminish, especially when they are misused.

Superpowers don't remain superpowers forever either. Were Obama and his minions more aware of the limits of their power, they would aim less at maintaining the status quo and more at working towards a soft landing for the United States.

This is emphatically not what they are doing.

Therefore, there is already too much turbulence for comfort. Everyone is feeling the pain – everyone, that is, who is not among the fraction of the one percent whose wealth has grown to levels so obscene as to defy description.

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They are feeling the pain in Israel too; it could hardly be otherwise. America's wars are not just bad for nearly all Americans and for all of America's victims. They also put Israel in peril.

Proponents of what is essentially a colonial project in the heart of the Middle East, founded just when the colonial system elsewhere was beginning to disintegrate, ought never to have expected the going to be easy. But, for a long time, Israel managed.

For decades, Palestinians suffered egregiously, and Jews, especially those not of European origin, faced hard times. But at least Israel's geopolitical situation was predictable; and not especially precarious.

Lately, though, the sands are shifting. Therefore, understandably, anxiety is on the rise.

Before the Soviet Union imploded and the first Bush launched the first Iraq War, the world Israel faced looked much the same as it had since Jimmy Carter engineered a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.

Despite what its propagandists claimed, Israel's neighboring states were never a great cause for concern. Once the Egyptian threat was removed, Israel was even more secure.

Its most powerful potential antagonist in the region was out of the picture, and its other neighbors were hardly threats at all. Jordan was not, and never had been, a problem. The situation in Lebanon was more complicated — because the country itself was unstable thanks, in part, to Israeli machinations — but the Lebanese army posed no danger.

There were, of course, sizeable, though hardly fearsome, armies in Syria and Iraq. With those countries, Israel had reached an implicit *modus vivendi*; it was hardly a durable arrangement, but it was a workable one.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states were not military threats at all. They were, however, paymasters of forces hostile to the Jewish state.

Partly to counter their influence, and also to add to the country's strategic depth, Israel had long cultivated non-Arab regional allies — Iran and Turkey, mainly. The alliance with Iran was the most important of all.

After its 1979 revolution, Iran became an official enemy. The Iranians wanted it that way: seeking regional influence, the theocrats in charge wanted to seem to be first among Palestine's friends.

Behind the scenes, though, the Iran-Israel alliance survived. Throughout the long and deadly Iran-Iraq War, Israel was plainly on Iran's side.

It was only after the first Bush defeated and then neutralized the Iraqi military that the Israelis found it expedient to turn Iran into an "existential threat." This was a useful way to scare all the right people at home and abroad.

Still smarting from the loss of its Best Friend Forever, the bloodthirsty Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the United States was especially eager to take the bait.

And so, a *de facto* alliance between Israel and Iran's regional rivals — the Saudis, especially, and the United Arab Emirates — began to take shape, just out of public view. What a pairing! Salafis and Zionists on the same page!

But a *de facto* alliance made a modicum of sense insofar as the overriding goal was to keep Iran down.

Not so the stranger alliances brought into being by the second Bush's war on Iraq and by the Bush-Obama mismanagement of its aftermath; or by the Obama administration's clueless efforts to weather the Arab Spring, overthrow the Libyan government, and wind down — before winding back up! — the war in Iraq.

The resulting situation is too chaotic to be described, especially as the alliances keep shifting. Making sense of what Obama *et. al.* are doing is therefore out of the question; from a geostrategic standpoint, what they are doing makes no sense at all.

To find a method to the madness, one would have to look to the vicissitudes of domestic politics in an election year; and, even then, it isn't clear what Obama thinks he has to gain.

The situation is too chaotic to benefit anybody – except those who profit from permanent war.

In Syria, for example, the United States is fighting with the Syrian government against the Islamic State, the IS. It is also fighting the Syrian government.

In both Syria and Iraq, it is on the same side as Iran. Iran is Israel's Enemy Number One; it has long been America's enemy too. Israel's *bête noire* in Lebanon, Hezbollah, is now also America's de facto ally in Syria.

Jordan, so far, has remained more or less out of the fray, but that could change at any time. The situation in Lebanon could also explode.

Were it not for the Egyptian military, Israel might soon find itself facing the IS on all its borders, not just those to its north and east.

Israel could also find that the de facto alliances between its enemies, real and imagined, and the United States are becoming more deeply entrenched. As America thrashes about, spreading murder and mayhem across the Middle East, anything can happen.

American elites are anxious; ordinary Americans are too because anxiety trickles down in just the way that wealth is supposed to (but rarely does).

Understandably, Israeli society is more anxious still – with predictably dire consequences: racism, theocracy, and even outright fascism are on the rise.

It was once possible to blame the Israeli Right for all the badness in Israel, and for all the badness Israel does. Now it looks as if the vast majority of Israelis – not just the Netanyahu government's supporters — have crossed over to the dark side.

The more awareness of this spreads, Israel's standing in Western public opinion can only decline. And so, new alliances are necessary.

Now that India is ruled by a right wing, business-friendly Hindu nationalist party whose leader, Narendra Modi, presided over the murderous 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, Israel is warming to the idea of an Israel-India alliance.

For an ally beyond the Arab world but still in the general vicinity, Iran was better by far, if only because it is closer. But, in view of the way the winds are blowing, Netanyahu and his co-thinkers will take what they can get.

It is even willing, for the first time in six decades, to look for allies that don't take marching orders from the United States.

Close relations with Russia are now on the horizon. With the many Russian immigrants that have come to Israel since the eighties, it is a natural fit.

But Russia is one of the Syrian government's few remaining international supporters. How improved Russian-Israeli relations will affect America's current and pending misadventures in Syria remains to be seen. The only sure thing is that it will affect them somehow.

No matter: for the Israelis, these are desperate times.

The only thing Israel now needs for all hell to break loose is for a new Intifada to erupt. The Netanyahu government owes the Palestinian Authority big time for keeping the lid on this past summer, during Israel's most recent – and most brutal – assault on Gaza.

But even with God on its side, the ethnocracy may not always be so lucky.

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Being overwhelmingly dominant militarily and economically is advantageous in countless ways, and being protected by a superpower that wields these advantages with impunity has so far worked very well for the Israelis. Zionists around the world have invested heavily to insure that the advantages keep coming.

But, as Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories have been saying for decades, *y'esh gvul*, there are limits (the expression also means “there is a border”).

They are right. There are only so many get-out-of-jail-free cards to be had, and when they're gone, they're gone.

Then the perils fall due. In the fifty-first state, even more than in the official fifty, reasons to be anxious just keep on coming.

This can spell bad news for the rest of the world: there is no telling what a superpower, or a superpower's protégé, will do when cornered.

But the situation presents countless opportunities as well.

If those opportunities are seized and put to advantage, we may yet get out of the Bush-Obama era in decent shape; and a fair semblance of justice may yet take hold in Israel-Palestine and throughout the entirety of the historically Muslim world.

There is no way any of this will happen, however, unless an aroused citizenry — in the United States and Europe and, if possible, in Israel itself — transforms the status quo.

Israel will never cede an inch of Palestinian land voluntarily; and the IS will not be undone by Obama's bombers and drones, or even by the “boots on the ground” that he will surely be sending to Iraq and Syria before long.

For change to come, Americans will have to make America stop acting like it owns the world. The world is not America's to do with as it pleases. To the extent it ever was, it is no more.

This is good news for Americans and Israelis, if not for their governments. It improves the prospects for soft landings in both countries.

It is good news too for people everywhere who yearn for FDR's four freedoms – especially freedom from fear.

The sooner the American political class and the Zionist establishment take this realization on board – the sooner they are forced to do so — the better off nearly everyone will be.