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Why Are We in the Middle East?

Jeff Faux
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To placate their pique at his effort to get a non-proliferation agreement with Iran, Barack Obama met last Thursday at Camp David with Saudi royals and leaders of the other five feudal dictatorships of the Persian Gulf. He reaffirmed the United States "ironclad" commitment to their security and promised even more military aid and cooperation. After the personal dust-up between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu settles, we can expect the Administration and Congress to add even more steel to our commitment to protect and subsidize Israel by adding more to its already vast store of sophisticated weapons.

Thus, we take another step deeper into the tragedy of U.S. intervention in the Middle East that has become a noxious farce.

Consider just one of the head-spinning subplots: We are allied with our declared enemy, Iran, against the bloody Islamic State, which was spawned from the chaos created by our own earlier decisions to invade Iraq and to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, which has us fighting side-by-side with jihadist crazies financed by Saudi Arabia, whom we are supporting against the Houthis in Yemen, the bitter rivals of Al Qaeda -- the perpetrators of 9/11!

Since 1980, we have invaded, occupied and/or bombed at least 14 different Muslim countries. After the sacrifice of thousands of American lives and trillions of dollars, the region is now a

cauldron of death and destruction. Yet, we persist, with no end in sight. As a former Air Force General Charles F. Wald remarked told the *Washington Post*, "We're not going to see an end to this in our lifetime."

Democrats and Republicans snipe over tactics, but neither wants to discuss the question of whether we should be there in the first place. Even liberals counseling caution, like the New York Times editorial board, hasten to agree that the U.S. must play a "leading role" in solving the Middle East's many problems. In other words, stay the course.

The ordinary citizen trying to make sense of all this might reasonably ask: why? The president's answer is that the war is in our "national interest." Congress says, Amen. The phrase causes politicians and pundits on talk shows to synchronize the nodding of their heads, signaling that the national interest should not have to be explained -- and certainly not debated.

When pressed for more specifics, our governing class offers four rationales for this endless war:

1. Fighting terrorism,
2. Containing Iran,
3. Securing oil
4. Defending Israel.

But when the citizen in whose vital interest the war is supposedly being fought takes a close look, he/she will find that none of these arguments -- or all of them together -- justifies the terrible cost, or even makes much sense.

Terrorism

The claim is that we will prevent another 9/11 by killing terrorists and keeping them offshore. But by now it is obvious that our interventions are counter-productive, i.e., they have vastly enlarged the pool of American-hating fanatics, willing to kill themselves in order to hurt us.

Americans are appalled when shown ISIS's public beheadings on TV. What they are not shown is the beheadings routinely performed by the Saudi Arabian government and our "moderate" allies. Nor are they told that militias allied to the U.S.-backed government in Iraq have killed prisoners by boring holes in their skulls with electric drills. This is the way bad people behave in that part of the world. ISIS is a symptom, not a cause, of Middle East fanaticism -- a problem rooted in corruption, tyranny and ignorance, which the United States cannot solve. Meanwhile, Arab governments themselves have enough firepower to defeat ISIS if they can put aside their own differences to do it. If they can't, it is not our job to save them from their own folly.

The rationale here is embarrassingly circular -- we must remain in the Middle East to protect against terrorists who hate America because we are in the Middle East. George W Bush's often

echoed claim that "They hate us for our freedoms" is nonsense. They hate us because we are foreign invaders. The longer we stay, the most likely it is that we will see another 9/11. And as the Boston Marathon bombing demonstrates, the people who carry out the next attack are more likely to live here, than there.

Iran

Iran is not a threat to U.S. security and will not be as far as one can see into the future. Its hostility to the U.S. is a product of over 50 years of our active interference in its politics, beginning in 1953 when the CIA overthrew the democratically elected prime minister and replaced him with a king.

Barack Obama is right that stopping the spread of nuclear weapons should be one of our highest international priorities. But taking sides in the Middle East's political and religious civil wars has undercut our credibility, making it look like we are more interested in checking Iran's influence than nuclear proliferation. Why, the inquiring American citizen might ask, is it OK for Israel and Pakistan to refuse to sign international treaties and allow inspection of their nuclear facilities, but not Iran?

In any event, the leverage that brought Iran to the negotiating table was not the U.S. military's presence or saber rattling in Washington. It was the economic sanctions.

Oil

Oil is an international commodity. When it comes out of the ground it is sold on world markets. Producing countries need consumers. U.S. consumers buy oil at world prices, and it is available to them as it is to everyone else who can pay for it. They get no special discount for having military bases in the area.

The economic motivation for the invasion of Iraq was not to assure that we Americans would have gas for our cars and oil for our furnaces, but to assure that American-based oil companies would be the ones to bring it here.

Today, we get less than 10 percent of our oil from the Persian Gulf. The U.S. is now projected to pass both Saudi Arabia and Russia as the world's largest oil producer in the next two years. By 2020 North America, and likely the U.S. alone, will be self-sufficient in oil and gas.

The claim that Americans need to be in the Middle East for the oil has gone from dubious to implausible.

Israel

The United States does not need Israel to protect its security. Nor does Israel need the U.S.

Israel has by far the most powerful sophisticated military in the entire region. Its arsenal includes nuclear and chemical weapons that, because Israel has refused to ratify international nonproliferation treaties banning, it can continue to develop with no outside interference. The surrounding Arab states are dysfunctional, disorganized and caught in the brutal quasi-religious war between Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia and Shiites led by Iran that is likely to drag on for decades. Hezbollah, which arose in Lebanon as a result of Israel's 1982 invasion, can harass, but is certainly no threat to Israel's existence.

Even if Iran eventually builds a bomb, Israel would still have the capacity to blow that country back to the Stone Age, and there is no evidence that Iran's political establishment is suicidal.

The security problem for Israel comes from within the territory it controls: the status of the conquered, embittered Palestinians, who in 1948 and 1967 were driven out of their homes and herded into the ghettos of the West Bank and Gaza in order make room for the Jewish state.

The Palestinians are militarily powerless. They can throw stones and occasionally talk some lost soul into becoming a suicide bomber. From Gaza they can lob wobbly mortars over the Israel border. But always at the cost of harsh retaliation. Two thousand Gazans were killed in the Israeli punitive attacks of August 2014. It will take them ten years to rebuild their homes and infrastructure.

Yet the Palestinians will not give up their own dream of an independent homeland -- at least on the territory occupied by the Israel army since 1967. So for almost a half century, our governments have pushed both sides to negotiate a permanent solution, pouring billions in aid to Israel, and lesser, but substantial amounts to placate the Palestinians and to bribe Egypt and Jordan into recognizing Israel. We have paid a huge political price; our role as collaborator in the Palestinian oppression is a major source of anti-Americanism in the Muslim world.

The U.S. effort has failed. Neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis -- both driven by anger, mutual distrust and historical grievances -- have behaved well. But, Israel is the one in control of the West Bank. So any credible solution requires that it end the apartheid system they have imposed, either by giving Israeli citizenship to the Palestinians (One-State) or by permitting the establishment of an independent Palestine (Two-States).

The Israelis will never accept a one state solution with the Palestinians. Among other reasons is a widely shared fear of the faster Palestinian birthrate. The re-election of Benjamin Netanyahu in March after he promised Israeli voters he would never accept two states, has buried that idea as well. The real Israel solution is already in motion on the ground -- pushing Jewish settlements further and further into the Palestinians' territory until there is no space left for a Palestinian state.

There are now about 600,000 people in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and their number is growing. No Israeli government in the foreseeable future will be capable of evicting a substantial share of them in order to give the Palestinians room to form an independent country. The only pressure on Israel is the fear that it might become an international pariah state -- as

South Africa did before it ended its apartheid. But so long as Israel is under the political protection of the U.S., it can, and will, ignore world opinion.

Our choice therefore is either to remain as enabler of Israel's "settler" solution, or, as part of a general withdrawal from the region, to let the Israelis and Palestinians deal with the consequences of their own behavior. Indeed, U.S. disengagement might be the political jolt needed to force a change.

Thus, the real answer to the question of why our country is stuck in the Middle East will not be found in the phrase, "national interest." Rather it will be found among a much narrower group of special interests -- military contractors, oil sheikdoms, the Israel lobby, and a media that hypnotizes the electorate into equating patriotism and war.

These interests are formidable. Their fallback argument is that we are in too far even to contemplate pulling out. Much too complicated. And America's "credibility" is at stake.

Maybe. But our credibility as a democracy is also at stake. To maintain it, responsible citizens should at least demand clarity about why we are slogging deeper and deeper into this quagmire, putting lives at risk, wasting enormous resources and diverting the attention of the U.S. government from the deterioration of our national economy -- the fundamental source of national security.

America's bi-partisan governing class has no intention of opening up their Middle East misadventure to such scrutiny. So it's up to the citizenry. The 2016 president election campaign will force candidates into forums, town meetings and question-and-answer sessions. It may be the last chance for citizens to pierce the veils of glib rhetoric that hide the reasons our rulers have pushed us into a part of the world where we have no real business and where our presence has only made things worse.