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## America Breaks the Middle East

From Bush to Obama

by ANDREW LEVINE

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In diplomacy, as in war (“diplomacy by other means,” according to Clausewitz), it can be useful to distinguish goals from strategies.

America’s goals in the Middle East are clear: it wants Middle Eastern countries to serve the needs of American capitalists and to advance their interests; and it wants to impose a *pax Americana*, a stable regional order maintained under American domination.

It has been this way since even before the end of World War II.

Years ago, the United States also wanted to replace Britain and France as the dominant Western power in the region. This was never a major concern, however; in part because, before World War II, making common cause with Britain and France against Germany was a higher priority.

In any case, the issue was moot by the time the Second World War ended. The British and French empires lingered on for a while, but barely. After Suez (1956), neither of America’s erstwhile rivals could any longer even pretend to be forces to be reckoned with. They had become America’s lesser partners.

After World War II, the region also became embroiled in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. This did not change America's fundamental goals, but it did affect how its diplomacy was waged.

Also, after 1948, when the state of Israel was established — and especially after 1967, when Israel crushed the armies of Egypt and other neighboring states, and took control of the entirety of Mandate Palestine — Israel's interests became America's too.

Israel became America's fifty-first state thanks mainly to Cold War exigencies, and because America wanted to keep Arab nationalism in bounds. From early on, pressure from the Israel lobby was a factor as well.

The old geopolitical reasons no longer apply or else are altered beyond recognition. Nevertheless, it is still axiomatic, in foreign policy circles in Washington, that what is good for Israel is good for the United States.

Nowadays, though, it is mainly the power that the Israel lobby wields over Congress that accounts for this otherwise inexplicable situation.

In recent years, that lobby has become increasingly desperate, as world and even American — including Jewish American — opinion turns against the self-described “nation state of the Jewish people.”

From its point of view, the situation can only get worse now that Israel has an openly racist government and a Prime Minister who, unlike the vast majority of American Jews, might as well be a card-carrying member of the GOP.

They shudder too when they see how the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement has taken hold and is on the rise.

But money talks. The American people are coming along, but it will be a while still before the American political class follows suit.

Media propagandists and other practitioners of the dark arts of “public diplomacy” do their best to obscure what would otherwise be obvious, but it is also clear what America's goals in the Middle East are not.

Spreading democracy and improving the situation of Middle Eastern peoples is plainly not a goal.

Neither, for that matter, is improving the lives of ninety-nine percent or more of the American people, though some of the benefits that come from controlling the world's oil supply probably do trickle down.

For America's part, it is not a case of malevolence for malevolence's sake. The people who determine national interests in capitalist societies are seldom evil. But, in their world, what

counts are oil, guns and money, not people – at least not people who are neither economically powerful nor politically connected.

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America's goals are clear; what is unclear is how to realize them, how to get from here to there.

Our foreign policy establishment has never been good at developing clear and coherent strategies. This is not usually a problem, the way it would be in other countries; the United States can throw its weight around enough to get by on force alone.

However, brawn cannot substitute for brains entirely – or forever. Even a country that strides the world like a colossus sometimes needs a plan.

The United States had a coherent strategy, more or less, while the Cold War was on. There were fewer complications then for policy makers to wrap their heads around; also, the situations they confronted were less fluid than they have since become.

Even so, those times were, if anything, more dangerous than times are now – thanks to the insanity of nuclear brinksmanship.

But in the Cold War era, *Realpolitik* principles were dominant in foreign policy circles; and, for the most part, capable people – albeit of the Dr. Strangelove kind — were running the show.

No more. The people running the show in the Bush-Obama War on Terror (or whatever the Obama administration chooses to call it) are inept and in way over their heads.

And so, the United States muddles along – from crisis to crisis. For at least the past decade, there has been no coherence, and very little rhyme or reason, to any of it.

The last more or less coherent strategy America deployed was the neoconservative one that took hold in the first years of the Bush-Cheney administration. It was a disaster.

The idea ostensibly was to abandon *Realpolitik* entirely, and to replace it with something more suitable to “the light of the world,” the “shining city on a hill” that Jesus Christ and Ronald Reagan spoke of.

The neocons conjured up the ghost of Woodrow Wilson too. They wanted “to make the world safe for democracy.”

Or so they said. In fact, their Wilsonian diplomacy came with an odd and fatal twist. Without quite admitting it, “safe for democracy,” for them, meant “safe for Israel to do as it pleases to Palestinians and to its neighbors.”

All the same, they never stopped talking about “democracy” and “American exceptionalism.” Perhaps some of them even believed what they said.

It is not clear, though, what they thought the connection might be between advancing democracy and subordinating American foreign policy to the perceived needs of an ethnocratic settler state half a world away.

Perhaps they believed, as some liberal philosophers do, that democracies don't wage wars against democracies; and they thought that the regimes they wanted to install throughout the Middle East would identify enough with Israel's *Herrenvolk* democracy to assure that all would go well for their favorite country and for the United States.

More likely, whether they realized it or not, their babbling on about democracy was for public relations only.

In any case, it soon became apparent that wherever free and fair elections were held, the results were not what the neocons wanted them to be.

And it became obvious, almost from the moment that George Bush declared "mission accomplished," that the neocons' plan to make over the Middle East was a non-starter.

Having a coherent strategy can be overrated.

The one the neocons promoted sputtered out within a year or two after it went into effect. Only the rhetoric survived, as a very different reality from the one that the neocons had imagined asserted itself.

Then, in recent years, a semblance of the worldview that caused America to invade Iraq in 2003 revived — thanks to "humanitarian interveners" in the Obama administration. From a dubious, though arguably admirable, "responsibility to protect" premise, Obama's liberal imperialists somehow derive nakedly imperialist conclusions.

Those neo-neocons don't have an overarching vision, the way the original ones did (and still do), and they are not unabashed Israel-firsters, but the effect is much the same. Were Obama not such an inherently cautious soul, the United States would now be making even more of a mess of world affairs than it is.

Unfortunately, though, Obama is not cautious enough. America therefore flounders about, seemingly aimlessly, from one crisis to another.

The only consistent motif is that nearly everything American diplomats and their counterparts in the Pentagon and the intelligence community decide to do ends up making matters worse — not only in some ideal-regarding sense, but in ways that the policy makers themselves, were they honest, would have to acknowledge.

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It would not be so bad had George Bush not broken Iraq a decade ago.

He stirred up the pot in Afghanistan too. Indeed, it would be fair to say that he would have broken Afghanistan as well, had it not been broken already — thanks, in part, to American machinations dating back to the Carter and Reagan eras.

After 9/11, the neocons needed a war to get the juices flowing for the (mis)adventures ahead.

The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center were planned and executed by Saudis and others in Al Qaeda, not by Afghanis. It is true that the Taliban government in Kabul offered Al Qaeda fighters safe haven, and that Taliban militants and Al Qaeda fighters were of a similar cast of mind. But Afghanis were not directly involved.

No matter. Bush and Cheney pounced on the opportunity — counting on servile media in the United States to build a case for war. The idea was to get Americans in a mood to invade Iraq, by lashing out —somewhere, anywhere — in revenge.

Servile media did all that was expected of it, and more.

Revenge is said to be a dish best served cold. Bush and Cheney and their advisors were too uncivilized for that. They liked their revenge hot.

And so they set in motion a process that continues to this day, with no real end in sight. As it unfolds, the miseries afflicted upon the Afghani people continue unabated.

But Iraq was always the target; and it was Bush's Iraq War, more than his war in Afghanistan, that broke the Middle East.

By now, even thoughtful Republicans agree that invading Iraq was a mistake. How could they not? The world Bush intervened into continues to crumble before their eyes, in ways that genuinely do endanger the United States.

Bush broke the Middle East, but he was never brought to justice for it — or for his many other crimes against the peace, against humanity, and against the Constitution he swore to uphold.

The man ought to be behind bars; instead, he is living the high life in Texas, venturing out only to collect the occasional speaker's fee that corporations and plutocrats dole out to ex-Presidents or, as in the case of the Clintons, to ex-President's wives.

The chance, slim as it may be, that brother Jeb will become America's next Commander-in-Chief is good for keeping those fees coming in.

To do as much harm as he did, Bush had to build — mindlessly, of course — on two centuries worth of British, French and American depredations.

The events of 9/11, the pretext for the Afghanistan War and also for the invasion of Iraq — despite the absence of any link between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi government or people — was blowback from what the United States had been doing to the region for decades.

For that, every American President since even before Jimmy Carter is culpable – Bush’s father and Bill Clinton, especially.

But it was Bush the Son who must answer for breaking “the cradle of civilization.” The consequences are still unfolding.

Obama campaigned on putting what Bush broke back together. In 2008, he was actually considered the peace candidate, and there are still Obama apologists who think of him that way.

Maybe he actually did – and still does – want to correct some of the harm his predecessor did.

But neither he nor the people around him have a clue how to go about it.

It is under their rule, even more than in the final years of Bush and Cheney that the world has had to pay for the fact that, while America has overwhelming military power and a determination to use it to further its goals, it has no strategy to speak of at all.

This became undeniable in 2011 as the Arab Spring erupted.

That year witnessed expressions of popular indignation and people power throughout the Arab world, as well as in Europe and the Americas. Outside the Middle East, it was nothing like 1968, but the world has not seen anything on a similar scale since that time.

In the United States, there were massive demonstrations against the (largely successful) efforts of Republican governors and legislatures to crush public sector unions and to weaken the already feeble labor movement. And there was Occupy Wall Street.

A difference from 1968 was that, by 2011, it had become clear that there was no Left left. There was therefore no organizational vehicle through which outrage could be channeled into constructive change.

It is different now – at least in Greece and Spain and elsewhere where austerity has stung the hardest. But, at the time, there was nothing.

The ruling classes took advantage of the organizational vacuum, fielding compliant “center-left” politicians to lead the way.

Thus the Obama administration let the Occupy movement exhaust itself, surreptitiously imposing only moderate levels of repression – until the bitter end.

Before long, the constructive energy the Occupy forces expended was either dissipated or channeled into the 2012 electoral circus – where, ironically, the goal was to reelect Barack Obama.

In the long run, the Obama administration’s malign neglect of workers’ struggles earlier in the year was at least as debilitating.

It was self-defeating too.

The Democrats' corporate paymasters want unions weak, but the Democratic Party needs those unions to supply the foot soldiers it needs at election time, and to give Democratic candidates money.

Evidently, Obama and the leaders of the national party decided that it would be better for them if the wishes of their corporate paymasters prevailed. They were wrong. The "shellacking" they sustained in the 2014 midterms, much like their shellacking four years earlier, was one of the more immediate consequences.

Wisconsin, along with several other heavily unionized Midwestern states, was Ground Zero for this latest Republican-led, plutocrat-funded assault on organized labor.

Wisconsin's Governor, Scott Walker, one of the more outrageous buffoons in Republican ranks, became a national figure on the strength of his union-busting shenanigans. Had state Democrats gotten a little more help from Obama and the national party, he would surely have been sent packing in the recall election that came a year later, or in the regular election in 2014.

Instead, he is presently contending for the Republican nomination for the presidency. With the Koch brothers and other billionaires behind him, his chances are as good as any of his rival's.

No doubt, Team Obama and the people in charge of the Democratic Party decided, as they always do, that the unions had nowhere else to go and that reelecting Obama in 2012 took priority over everything else.

They were wrong; but being wrong, in their circles, is par for the course.

There is no more telling example than the way the Clinton State Department mishandled the Arab Spring.

Because the buck stops where it does, their fumbling was enough to put Barack Obama in the same league as George Bush.

Obama and his Secretary of State destabilized what Bush had not yet gotten to, and they broke what Bush's adventurism had not yet destroyed.

Libya was the first casualty. Bush and Cheney cannot be blamed for that, any more than Bush the Father or Bill Clinton can be blamed for Bush the Son's Iraq War.

The consequences continue to accrue. The raid on the American consulate – and CIA outpost – in Benghazi is the least of it, notwithstanding the efforts of disingenuous Republicans to use the incident against Hillary Clinton.

The refugees and asylum seekers trying desperately to flee from Libya to European detention centers (concentration camps, essentially) provide more telling evidence of Clinton's – and America's — ineptitude.

Clinton — and therefore Obama — botched Egypt too. Now, as a result, the military dictatorship of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has imposed an even more brutally repressive regime upon the Egyptian people than the one they overthrew in the glory days of the Arab Spring.

In the absence of a coherent strategy, the American military is effectively running U.S.-Egypt relations. The connections between the two militaries have run deep at least since the end of the seventies, when, under Jimmy Carter's aegis at Camp David, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat signed peace accords that effectively removed the prospect of future wars between Israel and Egypt.

The price that Egypt exacted for this was integration — along with Israel, though to a lesser degree — into the Pentagon's ambit, and therefore into the welcoming arms of the American “defense industry,” in whose hangars and storerooms Egyptian generals buy weapons like spoiled kids in a toy shop.

This serves America's purposes – not by design (for there is no design), but by default. In much the way that American policies towards Latin American dictatorships were governed by the exigencies of military to military relations and the needs of the armaments industry in the United States, so has it been, since Camp David, with the Egyptian military.

Stability is achieved, for a while, under the army's boot, but the underlying problems that cause instability remain unresolved. The day of reckoning is postponed. It will surely come eventually. As the slogan goes, “no justice, no peace.”

The situation elsewhere in the Middle East is hardly better.

Indeed, it is in Iraq and Syria that America's mindless bungling has so far had the most disastrous effects.

War-mongering Republicans, like John McCain and Lindsey Graham, blame Obama for the rise of the Islamic State. They have a point.

For them, though, the problem is not enough American military involvement; they think combat troops ought never to have been removed from Iraq, and they think they should be brought back now.

It hardly bears saying that the opposite is true.

In Iraq, at various times as the war raged on, displays of brute force on America's part sometimes, briefly, kept acute instability at bay. But it might as well be a law of nature: that the U.S. is bound to get it wrong, and, in the end, to make matters worse.



Matters already are worse – because, instead of correcting Bush and Cheney’s mistakes, Obama built upon them. And, by groping along from day to day without anything like coherent strategy, he broke much of what he inherited that was somehow still intact.

If, as seems likely, Hillary Clinton succeeds him, count on the situation in the Middle East – and nearly everywhere else — becoming even worse. Count on the Middle East getting broken in ways that can now be only dimly imagined.

Should it fall to her, as it probably will, to lead future phases of the war on terror – by now, in effect, a war on the historically Muslim world – her slogan might as well be: “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”