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Realpolitik and the Middle East power play

Prince Michael of Liechtenstein
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The active regional powers in the Middle East are Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and Turkey. Global powers, the United States and Russia, are also involved in the area. Europe remains aloof – to its peril.

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The so-called “Arab Spring,” a series of popular upheavals throughout the Middle East and North Africa triggered in late 2010 by an increase in food prices in North Africa, was misinterpreted in the West as a pro-democracy movement. With misguided support from Europe and the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, the movement spread, destabilizing the region. In Egypt in particular, a government takeover by Muslim fundamentalists ended only after the military intervened. The country, a core partner of the U.S., can no longer play its stabilizing role in the region.

Historically, political miscalculations and land grabs by Great Britain and France have led to the creation of artificial states in the Middle East, such as Iraq and Syria. Today, these are failed states, playgrounds for regional and global powers, as well as non-state actors, such as Daesh (also known as Islamic State or IS) and other terror groups. Except for Daesh, these groups receive at least some support from regional powers, and also from the U.S. and Russia, which are fighting a proxy war in Syria and Iraq.

Missing framework

After years of failure, the latest U.S.-sponsored military campaign against Daesh finally appears to be making progress on the ground. Success on the battlefield alone will not solve the problem, though. In the absence of a sustainable regional solution – a political framework for the Middle East – terrorist and semi-terrorist groups will continue to fight in Syria and Iraq.

Iran tends to use destabilization to build up its influence in the region. This is a major concern for other regional powers, specifically Saudi Arabia and Israel, but also for Turkey. Iran's aggressive action in Yemen has forced Saudi Arabia to intervene there.

The U.S. used to be a stabilizing factor in the Middle East. With the exception of Iran, all local powers were loyal U.S. allies for years. For various reasons, this has changed. President

Obama's policy of disengagement has created a geopolitical void in the region. Washington's pressure on Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak to resign during the Arab Spring opened the door to radical Islam, not democracy, in the country. That blunder put a big question mark over the America's reliability as an ally – particularly in Saudi Arabia, the U.S.'s closest partner in the region.

U.S.-Israeli relations also suffered, as did those between the West and Turkey. The latter ties began to deteriorate long before the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Ankara, because the West did not sufficiently recognize Turkey's national interests.

Recently, the U.S. Congress shortsightedly overruled President Obama's veto to the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). The populist legislation opens the way for those victimized by the 9/11 terror attack to sue Saudi Arabia in U.S. courts – despite the established fact that the Saudi government was not involved in the attack and did not sponsor its perpetrators. JASTA ignores the principle of sovereign immunity and the European Union has protested its passage.

All this adds to instability in the Middle East. Some of the governments there are beginning to look toward Russia, which appears to be a more reliable partner. This has been showcased by Russia's unwavering support for the Syrian government.

The Middle East is not as crucial for the U.S. as it is to Europe. Europe, however, is not a real player there. Its role in the region is reduced to moralistic pontificating, which often brings results contrary to what is expected. Europe appears to ignore the brutal reality that a further weakening of the governments in the Middle East and North Africa will result in increased migration to the rich countries across the Mediterranean.

Germany, at least, appears to have realized the futility of moralistic talk and at long last Chancellor Angela Merkel is negotiating directly with the presidents of Turkey and Egypt.