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The United States and the Middle East: the Politics of Miscalculation



John Foster Dulles with U.S. President Eisenhower in 1956 – Public Domain

The U.S. experience in the Middle East is a classic study of political and military miscalculation leading to strategic failure. President Joe Biden's political support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which is being sorely tested, and his military support for Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which is making the United States complicit in Israel's genocidal campaign, is the latest and worst example of U.S. miscalculation. Overall, the exercise of U.S. military power in the Middle East, designed to gain strategic advantage, has backfired. It has led to disarray in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and has opened diplomatic opportunities for Russia and China.

The modern start for U.S. miscalculation in the Middle East took place nearly 70 years ago, when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered to support the construction of Egypt's

Aswan Dam and then abruptly reneged. When Dulles, bowing to right-wing pressures to stop the financial support for the dam, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company. The original offer to Egypt created political anxiety in Israel, leading to a huge increase in French military support to the IDF and eventually to a secret British-French-Israeli scheme to invade the Sinai and secure the Suez Canal. The withdrawal of U.S. aid also opened the door to increased Soviet influence in Cairo, and the nationalization of the canal led to the tripartite invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower's criticism of the tripartite invasion was treated favorably by Egypt, but the proclamation of the Eisenhower Doctrine a year later was critical of Nasser and the strengthened Soviet-Egyptian relationship. The Eisenhower Doctrine led to CIA's covert support for Nasser's political opposition as well as a serious economic boycott. The boycott served as a model for later (mostly unsuccessful) sanctions against such Third World countries as Cuba and Libya, which opened up additional opportunities for Soviet diplomatic influence.

The wars of Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush had enormous unexpected consequences that are still creating political and military problems for the United States throughout the region. The Gulf War in 1990, popularly known as Desert Storm, is considered by most pundits to be a major success for U.S. interests, but the war could have been avoided. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev had received Saddam Hussein's agreement to withdraw Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but it was too late for a Bush administration that was committed to the use of force. The war led to serious difficulties for President Bill Clinton in the Middle East throughout his two-term presidency. Moreover, Operation Desert Storm was Osama bin Laden's inspiration to attack the United States.

Interestingly, Bush Senior and his national security adviser, General Brent Scowcroft made a serious effort to dissuade Bush Junior from his fateful decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003, which rivaled the war in Vietnam as two of the worst miscalculations in any U.S. decision to go to war. The elder Bush argued that the use of U.S. military power could lead to fracturing the Iraqi state and compromise the long-term balance of power in the Persian Gulf, which it certainly did. The United States had no genuine case for war against Iraq, so it manufactured a bogus case around non-existent nuclear weaponry. CIA director George Tenet helped the president in making the case by providing phony intelligence reports to the White House. Tenet assured the president that it would be a "slam dunk" to provide such intelligence.

Scowcroft wrote an article for the *New Yorker* to remind the younger Bush that his father's administration had good reasons for stopping the U.S. invasion at the Iraqi border in 1991. Scowcroft concluded that a U.S. invasion would lead to civil war in Iraq and would require a U.S. military presence for a protracted period. Indeed, several thousand U.S. military forces are still in Iraq, and contending with the presence of Iranian influence. The U.S. invasion opened the door to Iran after all.

President Biden may have made the most impactful miscalculation of any American president with his belief that huge amounts of military and economic aid to Israel would lead to U.S. influence over Israeli decision making as well as to Israeli moderation of its policies in the West Bank and Gaza. There is no reason for Biden to be surprised by any opposition from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that would compromise the interests of the United States. Netanyahu often timed the announcement of new settlements on the West Bank during official U.S. visits, including two of Biden's visits, and the Israeli prime minister's address in 2015 to a Joint Session of Congress in order to block the Iran nuclear accord should have led to consequences, particularly a review and reduction of U.S. military support. Biden also should have known that he can't have it both ways by criticizing the illegal and immoral Russian invasion of Ukraine while being complicit in the illegal and immoral Israeli war in Gaza. There is really no moral difference between President Vladimir Putin's horrific campaign to suffocate Ukrainian self-determination and sovereignty and Netanyahu's horrific campaign to suffocate the Palestinians. Biden continues to emphasize the importance of "the day after" regarding the Gazan war, when the urgent need today for a cease-fire and the end to Israeli occupation should have the highest priority. Biden may build his reelection campaign around his support for Ukraine, but his re-election bid may fail because of his complicity with Netanyahu and the IDF.

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