



Washington needs to change how it thinks about the Middle East

WHETHER 2021 brings Joe Biden to the Oval Office or returns President Donald Trump, well-meaning foreign policy advisers will again bring to the table a counterproductive understanding of the Middle East that will continue to undermine our ability to advance our interests.

This is in part due to the ingrained and fundamentally flawed template of the region that ignores the primacy of the tribal nature of their peoples, and misunderstands why Western-style democracy is not warmly greeted by the majority of those people who don't want a separation of their "church from state." This is why so many of our policies fail. We need to be reminded that elections don't create democracy without rule of law, pluralism, religious freedom, freedom of speech and tolerance, all of which are mostly absent in the Middle East.

In frustration, many Americans have thrown their hands up, demanding we leave the Middle East because the conflicts are insolvable and don't involve our interests. We are still married to the faulty ideas of the Middle East constructed in the aftermath of World War I that does not reflect on how the peoples of the region see themselves, or how it functions on a local and regional level.

Will the next administration learn the lessons of the past, understanding that projecting our viewpoints on a totally different civilizational perspective doesn't work, and that Arab and Muslim societies are oriented more to clan and sect than nation?

The conflicts in the Levant, Mashriq and the Maghreb may not have any solutions for generations. Whether we are speaking of Libya, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Egypt, Iran or Turkey, our goals must be more modest, fostering shared interests. Although we should give

up on the idea of once-and-for-all solutions, that does not mean giving up on influencing the actors to advance common geopolitical and economic interests. A fresh look at the region would serve America well, acknowledging the legacy of colonial imposed borders that never considered the implications of forcing disparate groups, clans, tribes and religious affiliations with ancient animosities to live under one flag.

Unfortunately as Trump and president Barack Obama learned, America cannot completely extricate itself from the region without significantly abandoning our interests, ceding the region to China, Russia, Iran and Turkey, all adversaries of America, and whose goals are to diminish American influence. According to Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky writing in *Politico* this month, "The US (still) has three truly vital interests in the region: limiting terrorism, protecting the flow of oil and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."

In 2011, Obama withdrew all American troops from Iraq, setting the stage for ISIS' rise. Trump is about to make a similar mistake by reducing troop levels by the end of 2020 to where they were when ISIS began its jihadist march of hell and destruction. Not only will Sunni Islamists like ISIS surge, they are already reconstituting in many areas of Iraq, but even more ominously, this will amplify the Iranian Shi'ite dominance of the Iraqi military that began with the Islamic State's initial rise.

As Hal Brands, distinguished professor of global affairs at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said, "It is a fantasy to think that the United States can disengage from the Middle East without consequence... hasty withdrawals are likely to be followed by hasty re-engagements."

America still has vital security interests in the Middle East, but we will keep repeating

the same mistakes if we don't fundamentally change how we perceive the region. What we need to do is the unthinkable, stop considering the borders of these nation-states as sacrosanct as the international community does. Following this course is a recipe for never-ending disasters. Those borders served the interests of English and French imperial desires in the early 20th century that carved up the Ottoman Empire after World War I, leading to repeated ethnic, civil, and religious wars and uprisings. The only thing that holds most of them together is authoritarian rule or forced power sharing arrangements, whether secular, civil, military or monarchical, with often a minority dominating the majority population.

For America to find modest success in the Middle East in the 21st century, a fresh analysis of the viability of every nation-state needs to be done, evaluating each on its own merits for stability, evaluating which nations have been reliable allies who deserve our continued diplomatic support and largesse, and which continually undermine our interests or are unable to be reformed because their intra-tribal and intra-religious conflicts are irreconcilable.

There is a world of difference between the unstable and artificially constructed multi-religious and multi-ethnic states like Lebanon and Iraq that are fundamentally unstable because of their demographic constituents who loath one another, as opposed to the authoritarian monarchical states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia that are mono-religious (Sunni) entities, whose clan-based societies are best described as tribes with national flags. Bahrain, although stable, is the most vulnerable with a Sunni minority dominating a Shi'ite majority that looks toward Iran.

US foreign policy since the end of World War I has prioritized the integrity

of nation-states. But after 100 years, is this still the wisest strategy?

Still reflecting the ossified colonial aspirations of the French and English memorialized in the Sykes-Picot agreement, some of those states have worked better than others. The real question that few will entertain is, should some Middle Eastern nations as currently constructed be better off being sent to the dustbin of history because they are irreparable? It is not our right to dissolve them, but it is our obligation to advance our interests and those of our allies, not to advance dysfunctional unstable and irreparable nation-states.

THE SANCTITY in preserving these artificial states forces round blocks into square holes and is analogous to the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Yugoslavia that was forced together under authoritarian rule after World War II. When given the opportunity, whether with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the case of Yugoslavia, or the misnamed Arab Spring for the Middle East, repressed people with ancient hatreds rise up against each other and chaos, violence and civil war are likely to follow. Just look at Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Even states with long historical pedigrees like Iran and Turkey, when they have incorporated significant minorities often persecuted them. Most people believe Iran is overwhelmingly Persian but in reality Persians represent only 55% of Iran. In the case of Turkey, Turks represent the vast majority of the population, but the 10% Kurdish population has been persecuted on and off. Egyptian Sunni fundamentalists still persecute their fellow Christian Coptic citizens. Nationalism, not multi-cultural entities is a better solution for the Middle East.

In Lebanon the situation at first seemed superficially better with power sharing ar-

rangements between the Christians, Sunnis, Druze, and Shi'ites that were imposed by the French. However Beirut, the Paris of the Middle East, was always an illusion, as demographics and rivalries changed over time. Whether it was the destabilization of Palestinian terrorists who controlled southern Lebanon in the 1970's and 80's, or the rise of Shi'ite Hezbollah in the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War with Israel, Lebanon's government structure does not reflect today's demographics and breeds resentment, with the deadly combination of a government being both weak and corrupt. Civil wars were the inevitable outcome.

Yet during my briefings in Congress, far too many American elected officials and their aides are still married to the idea that the Lebanon, with its impotent Lebanese Armed Forces, is still an independent and effective force, capable of counterbalancing the might of Iranian-controlled Shi'ite Hezbollah. Nothing is farther from the truth. Today, Lebanon is the playground of Iran, Russia and now China, vying for influence and trying their best to undermine American interests. This is a perfect example of artificial nation-states undermining our and our allies' interests.

So how should America approach the Middle East going forward?

American involvement does not mean putting American troops on the frontlines. Small forces with a small footprint that work behind the scenes, have a disproportionately positive effect, whether in Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan.

After the American invasion and "victory" in Iraq in 2003, the US reconstructed the nation according to the Skyes-Picot lines, imposing a western democratic system that brought Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds together, laying the seeds of future civil wars that followed. We missed the

opportunity when Iraq was in our hands to create three nation-states that reflected the realities of the demographics. It certainly couldn't have been worse than what transpired.

Was this possible? At the time yes, and even Biden was on board, Yet the lesson we must learn is that continuing to adhere to the UN straight-jacket formula of perpetuating unstable nation-states must be reconsidered.

In Jordan, the Bedouin minority lead by the non-indigenous Hashemite monarchy is increasingly vulnerable to the Palestinian Jordanian majority, Iran and Sunni Jihadists. Jordan's eventual disintegration and civil war may be on the horizon, and making believe that it is stable as most foreign policy advisers I speak with do, is a prescription for disaster. Yet in this case, support of the Western oriented Hashemites is in our interest and must be maintained.

To advance our interests we will sometimes have little choice but to work with authoritarian, corrupt regimes. As Seth Frantzman wrote in *The Jerusalem Post*, "in a complex region Israel (or America) sometimes can work with authoritarians and democrats, usually based on shared interests or shared enemies, rather than a simple reading of democratic or authoritarian values."

We need to begin anew, we need to see the Middle East's history and its tribal nature as it is, not as we think it should be. That begins with ending the charade that all the states of the Arab Muslim Middle East need to be preserved despite some being nothing but failed artificial constructs. ■

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