

The Middle East Watches, and Waits, for the Next American President

by **Conrad Black** (October 2016)



President Barack Obama, in his address to the annual opening session of the United Nations General Assembly, said that it would be desirable for the Israelis not to develop Palestinian land (settlements) and for the Palestinians to accept the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. This is true, but also a truism. While everyone knows that there have been fierce ethnic, tribal, sectarian, and national disputes in the Middle East for centuries, most would not know that there has been an almost constant state of war for 4,000 years across much of the area, despite the comparatively stabilizing influence over centuries of the Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and British and French empires.

As a prominent Lebanese journalist recently reflected, Arabs shriek of crimes and vengeance if an outside power knocks down two Arab houses, but they scarcely react at all in polemical terms as Arabs themselves lay waste whole Arab countries. A local community and tribal affiliation commands more loyalty than a country, and all governmental structures that try to transcend close affiliations traditionally collapse, if not from invasion, then from within. Most Middle Easterners don't like chaos and violence, but most of them, except, to a degree, for Israelis, are resigned to it.

In the region, only the present Turkey and Iran (neither an Arab country) have not been lengthily conquered, though much of what is now Turkey was subsumed into the Roman Empire for 500 years and Iran was entirely but loosely occupied by the Soviet Union and Britain during the Second World War, to ensure Allied oil supplies. Egypt, still in population, culture, and history the premier Arab country, oscillated for millennia between great eminence in the known (Mediterranean) world and abject subjugation by bellicose invaders.

New belligerent groups kept arriving in the crossroads of the Middle East from all directions. Any somewhat numerous group that had developed new military techniques simply swept through like a tornado, massacred or enslaved civil populations and destroyed almost everything. But their success was just transitory military superiority, not a talent to govern or civilize, as the British showed in India and the French, to some extent, in parts of their empire.

Archeologists steadily unearth these ancient Mid-East civilizations under encrustations of mud or cocoons of sand, like layers of a tree. The 17th-century BC conquest of Egypt by the much smaller Hyksos, a mysterious Indo-Asiatic migrant swarm from Anatolia, presaged the Nazi conquest of France in 1940, and many other brilliant but evanescent military triumphs. The Hyksos had swift armoured war chariots, against which the Egyptians were defenceless, and they just poured into Egypt in great numbers, overwhelming all border points like the German panzers in 1940. Egypt was completely defeated, humiliated and enslaved (except for the extreme Upper Nile), as France was in 1940. It obediently submitted, but assimilated the Hyksos, corrupted them with the relative opulence of Egyptian life, awaited the approach of new, fiercer and more militarily advanced invaders, and eventually regained authority in Egypt with the equivalent of a national resistance and patriotic restoration.

The pattern has in some respects repeated itself in recent years, with the disintegration of Syria and Iraq, artificial states created by Britain and France in their carve-up of the Ottoman Empire, even before they militarily defeated it in 1918. They had referred to Turkey as "the sick man of Europe" and "the abominable Porte" for nearly a century, but the Turks proved extremely formidable. During the First World War, they threw the Allies into the sea at Gallipoli in 1915 though outnumbered almost two to one, inflicting 250,000 casualties and almost ending Winston Churchill's political career. The Turks lasted longer in the war than the Russians did.

If anyone can stabilize at least part of the region, they can. It is surprising that their current leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an ambitious Muslim-Turk nationalist in other respects, has not been more assertive. He has been mired in Kurdish affairs (most Kurds live in Turkey with demonstrative dissatisfaction, but Erdogan has cultivated good relations with the Iraqi region of Kurdistan, now effectively independent). But most Syrians and Sunni Iraqis would welcome

Turkish action to end the ostensibly civil wars in those countries.

The principal outside meddlers in the Middle East now are the Russians, and the most active players within it are the Iranians, claiming legitimate inheritance of the grandeur of the Persian Empire and of the sword of Islam, and the anachronistic semi-secular petro-state, Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud, pre-eminent among the indigenous nomads when the West discovered oil in the Arabian peninsula, has sustained itself by arming itself from the proceeds of oil, admitting 60 per cent of its residents as temporary visitors doing subordinate work, and keeping the Islamist extremists at bay by paying Danegeld to the militant Wahhabi sect all around the Muslim world (and beyond), in exchange for its quiescence domestically.

The traditional self-proclaimed Western European vocation at understanding and working with the Arabs has (deservedly) collapsed in shambles. Since the unimaginable Suez fiasco of 1956 – when the British and French, after the Egyptian seizure of the Suez Canal, pre-positioned forces in Cyprus, encouraged an Israeli invasion of Sinai, then purported to intervene as neutral peacekeepers, invading Egypt (rather ineffectually) – European efforts in the area have been unrelievedly inept and they have no credibility there with anyone.

The United States is the power that could accomplish something, and has, with the ceasefires negotiated between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Syria largely by the efforts of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, and the Camp David agreement (1978) between Egypt and Israel sponsored by Jimmy Carter, and, though it has been a complete failure, the Oslo Accord (1995) championed by Bill Clinton. Obama came to office full of optimism that he could make real headway in the Mid-East. In his bizarre revisionist address in Cairo in 2009, he seemed to imagine that because the United States was now led by an African-American with a partly Muslim background, all differences his country had had with the Muslim world would be alleviated.

Obama promised firm action to prevent Iran becoming a nuclear power and forceful military intervention if the beleaguered Syrian government again gassed its own citizens. He acknowledged after two years that he would have been less optimistic about Mid-East peace if he had known how intractable the problems were. (After 4,000 years, this was not a secret.) Of course, he waffled on his

“red line” about Syrians gassing Syrians and sponsored an agreement for a nuclear military Iran in 10 years (if it chooses to wait that long, as the inspection regime is farcical).

The Middle East is probably looking to the next president with more curiosity than most regions. Either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump will abandon Obama’s ardent and fruitless courtship of the Iranians, and cease to cold-shoulder Israel and the co-operative Arabs, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Neither would apologize, as Obama’s spokespeople did last week, for Syrian army casualties from American bombing in the muddled, so-called war on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which as far as Russia and Iran are concerned is just as much a war on Western-sponsored, anti-Assad factions in Syria.

The battle for the heart and mind of the next occupant of the White House is already on. In the last 10 days, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammed Jarad Zarif, denounced Saudi Arabia as a terrorist country in *The New York Times*, and the Saudi foreign minister, Adel Al-Jubeir replied in *The Wall Street Journal* that Iran was the greatest terrorist sponsor of all. (It is.)

Saudi Arabia is not much in the terrorism business now, even indirectly, but to paraphrase FDR (referring to the Somoza regime in Nicaragua), the Saudis may be SOBbs, but they’re our SOBbs. The official Saudi press remarked last week that “the Americans have traded their traditional allies for Iran.” So they have. But whatever else the raucous U.S. election accomplishes, buyer’s remorse on that issue is almost at hand.

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