

How Trump Can Sort Out the Middle East

He'll need cooperation from Turkey, Russia, and other regional powers.

by Conrad Black



The Democratic charge that the Trump administration has no strategy for the Middle East is obviously false. It has elaborated a strategy that includes Russia and Turkey. The problem the administration has faced is that Russia as an issue has been so aggravated by Democratic myth-makers, with the (presumably) inadvertent cooperation of some congressional Republicans, that it has been very difficult for Trump to deal with Russia sensibly without exciting partisan hysteria and crowding the Democratic television news networks with the tiresome faces and voices of Obama's now-discredited intelligence chiefs (James Clapper and John Brennan), beating

the old tambourines about Russia determining U.S. elections. The basic American conceptual problem with this whole complex of issues is that the United States has legitimate interests in the Middle East and has reasonable ambitions for a civilized relationship with Russia and Turkey, but the president has also pledged to extract the country from, and stay out of, permanent wars in the region. These are valid objectives that can be reconciled, but not easily.

Nothing could have more perfectly illustrated the stark bankruptcy of George W. Bush's Iraq War than the Iraqi parliament's vote over the weekend to tell the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq. It is a non-binding resolution, taken without the Kurdish and Sunni legislators present, and the next government will presumably not act on it, but it does indicate that in the Middle East, as in Europe, the states patched together after World War I have all failed. Czechs and Slovaks have split Czechoslovakia; Yugoslavia now consists of the sovereign states of Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro; and Syria and Iraq have cracked up also, and as in Yugoslavia, violently. Britain and France fanned Arab nationalism against the Turks, Britain promised Palestine to the Jews and the Arabs at the same time, and France took over Syria and Lebanon as colonies while Britain helped itself to what are now Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. Nation-building at a distance among ethnic groups that are antagonistic to each other is hazardous.

The United States has to find a way to defend its legitimate national interests in the Middle East without being on call, like firemen, for constant interventions there, with high resultant expenses, significant casualties, and an excessive commitment of American military resources to that region. The first step was to eliminate American dependence on Middle East oil, something all presidents starting with Eisenhower have decried. This has been to some extent a bipartisan effort:

U.S. oil imports declined from 15 million barrels a day under President Clinton to 10 million under George W. Bush, to 5 million under President Obama, and now the United States is a net energy exporter for the first time since the days of President Truman. The second step is to put together local balances of the correlation of forces that promote comparative stability. This effectively requires inviting Turkey and Russia to exercise influence in the region on a tolerable basis of respect for human rights, while ensuring that they are rigorously opposed to any propagation of terrorist activity and don't endanger Israel. Any such ambition runs afoul of the current Democratic hysteria about Russia, which arose in their shock at being defeated in the 2016 election and their instant conjuration and brainwashing of their obedient media (it could have been done with an eye-dropper) that Russia had colluded with Trump to win a bogus presidential mandate.

The European Union's rejection of Turkey (completely unlike the relatively generous treatment in trade and political matters accorded by the United States and Canada to Mexico) pushed Turkey back toward the Arab world, from which it had been expelled in World War I. Arab nationalism flickered on after World War I and flared up after World War II when the colonial powers withdrew and the artificial states become unstuck. The Iranian revolution, assisted by the Carter administration, which overthrew the shah and replaced him with an extremist Islamic regime that is still riveted on the back of Iran, has been virulently anti-Western and anti-Israel and is encroaching on the Arab world, sponsoring terrorist organizations in many Arab countries, while Turkey, having no better alternative, is also focusing on the Arabs. The Arabs do not remember flatteringly and gratefully their previous experiences of Persian and Turkish domination.

Pressure from Iran and Turkey and the disintegration of Iraq and Syria (thanks largely to the United States, though its

policymakers had not sought that objective) have effectively caused the leading Arab powers to abandon their hostility to Israel, which was always essentially just a distraction of the Arab masses from the misgovernment their rulers were inflicting on them. The fluidity of changing ambitions and affinities and the collapse of several other countries in the region (Libya, Sudan, and Yemen as well as Syria and Iraq, and a terrible civil war in Algeria that seems now to be generally under control), and an immense humanitarian crisis with many millions of refugees, have all added to the sanguinary confusion. The United States should be aware of its responsibility for some of this, as should the British. The British pledge of Palestine as a Jewish homeland without compromising the rights of the local Arabs could be foreseen to generate the problems it has, and there has never been any alternative but to divide the territory between the two claimants. The American undermining of the shah, the second Iraq War and its repurposing of Iraq as a democracy, and the Iranian nuclear agreement led by the Obama administration have all been unlimited catastrophes.

And the danger posed by Russia is not the one raised by Democrats or Russia-preoccupied Republicans such as Senator Marco Rubio of Florida. Russia is a great nation and civilization, but it is not now a great power like the U.S. and China; it is an economic paper tiger with a GDP smaller than Canada's and no political institutions of any credibility or value. It is an overwhelmingly corrupt country that has never had one day of good government, wallowing in the frustrations of having gambled everything built up in 300 years from Peter the Great to Stalin in a relatively bloodless world struggle with the United States and its allies (when the U.S. had useful allies because of their self-interest), and of having lost. The danger Russia presents now is that if the United States adds to Russia's humiliations, it could drive Russia into the arms of China, and millions of people from China's surplus manpower could exploit the untapped resources

of Siberia on a royalty basis. The resulting geopolitical threat to the United States and the whole world would be very serious.

President Trump senses all this, and what he seeks is to reach a modus operandi with Russia, without the Democrats and their media parrots shrieking "Treason!" at him, that gives Russia some stabilizing role in the Middle East – cooperating with Turkey, whose return to Syria would be welcome, and with both of those powers countering Iran, which the United States will in any case force back into itself with the current policy of severe sanctions and reprisals to outrages. Iran can bluster and threaten all it wishes, but even its deluded theocracy must now realize that the free lunch of appeasement in Washington is over. It should now be clear to everyone that the U.S. could not interpose itself with 400 of its special forces between the Turkish army and the PKK Kurdish militia. Egypt and Saudi Arabia can make it clear that the Palestinians can have an autonomous state if they end their violence and accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, along the lines of the 2001 Taba discussions with a narrower West Bank and deeper Gaza Strip for Palestine and a connection between them.

Syria and Iraq should ultimately be regrouped in a loose confederation of largely autonomous zones, including Kurdistan. The inner stability and integrity from outsiders of this arrangement could be sponsored by Turkey, Russia, the U.S., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and a respectable regime in Iran when one emerges. It is generally in this direction that the administration is going, and it is a sensible path. The Democrats are going to lose badly by championing Obama's green light for Iran to have nuclear weapons just six years from now, with its \$150 billion signing bonus to promote terrorism and kill Americans. It was a terrible agreement and should be unmourned.

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