

Toward a Post-Obama Middle East

In the week in which the Russians escalated their attacks on the Syrian factions being assisted by the United States and what is left of the Western Alliance, and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas renounced the long-dead letter of the Oslo Agreement (for which his predecessor Yasser Arafat and the Israeli leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres shared a Nobel Peace Prize, and which the Palestinians have never honored), and as our NATO ally Turkey assisted the dementedly violent Islamic State (ISIS), which the rest of NATO opposes, at least verbally, there must be someone in the White House – apart from janitors and the Marines who open the doors for invited visitors – who senses the tattered state of American policy in the region. The bipartisan wall of steel, from George W. Bush to Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama, vociferously supported by the British and French leaders of the time, that swore that Iran would be prevented from achieving nuclear weapons whatever happened, gradually metamorphosed into the facilitation of a militarily nuclear Iran in ten years, if the Iranians, in their own free determination of their interest, choose to wait that long. President Jimmy Carter, another Nobel Prize winner, was instrumental in replacing the shah with the ayatollahs in Iran in 1978; he has lived long enough to see the bitter fruit of what he helped to sow.

President George H. W. Bush has certainly seen the consequences of not removing Saddam Hussein when he very effectively cleared Saddam out of Kuwait. President Bill Clinton must have some idea that if he had responded more firmly to the initial terrorist attacks on the U.S. by Muslim extremists, at the first attack on the World Trade Center, and the ones on the Khobar Towers, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and on the U.S.S. *Cole* (1993–98), there might have

been some chance of averting 9/11. George W. Bush may perhaps have some idea that plunging into Iraq a second time, claiming the existence there of a nascent nuclear program that could not be found, disbanding the 400,000 members of the Iraqi armed forces and police with retention of their weapons and munitions – ensuring that the country would become a bloodbath – and promoting the democratic election of antidemocratic forces in Gaza, Lebanon, and Egypt may not have been wise policy after all. The Arab Spring that may conceivably have achieved something useful in Tunisia has generated chaos in Libya and Syria, and only a generous Providence and astute general staff in Cairo prevented the metamorphosis of Egypt into a theocracy run by the elements that assassinated Anwar Sadat. But there is no sign that the White House of that latest American Nobel Peace laureate, Barack Obama, has any misgivings about his desertion of the democratic forces in Iran, his U-turn on Iranian nuclear weapons, his vanishing red line in Syria, or the “reset” of Russian relations leading to the Russians’ attacking America’s protégés in Syria, whom Obama finally condescended to assist several years after complacently telling President Assad he had to go. (Obama will go before Assad does.)

He seems still to be contemplating the accrued prestige, in the opinion of Washington’s most deferential media commentator on the administration, Tom Friedman of the *New York Times*, of having laid out a “doctrine” as James Monroe, Henry Stimson, and Harry Truman did. Those declared the Americas inaccessible to further colonization, declined to recognize territorial acquisitions by force, and undertook to assist local forces attacked, internally or externally, by aggressive Communist organizations. Friedman and Obama worked out this new doctrine as having the courage to make preemptive, ex gratia concessions to hostile countries in the belief that they would then behave less abrasively, given that the U.S. had an immensely greater military capability than the countries it was appeasing. The delusional vanity of this administration

will presumably depart official circles with the outgoing president, but Americans should not imagine that rebuilding American credibility in the world is going to be easy or fast.

Taking a 40-year view of the Middle East, which is not an especially long cycle in such an ancient part of the world, the United States started with Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel, as close and reliable allies, and stable, if not very amiable, regimes in Syria, Iraq, and Libya; and was set to build on the ceasefires that Henry Kissinger had negotiated after the Yom Kippur War and the better relations between Egypt and Israel that were emerging (and that President Carter did bring to fruition at Camp David, for which he deserved but did not specifically receive the Nobel Prize). Now it is every man for himself in the region (women have no influence): Iran and its Islamist puppets are violently hostile to the U.S.; Turkey is quite hostile; there is little warmth in U.S. relations with Israel; and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States will take what they can get from the U.S., especially anti-missile defenses, but have no confidence in nor any reservoir of good will with it. No one can explain why the United States helped evict the Shah, why President Reagan tried to conciliate Tehran in the Iran-Contra affair, why the Bushes led two invasions of Iraq in twelve years, why the U.S. led a huge alliance into Afghanistan – after NATO determined for the first time in its history that the entire alliance had been attacked at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – only to then decamp to Iraq, leaving its allies in Afghanistan with an ambiguous mission and grossly insufficient forces. No one understands why the U.S. turned on its allies such as Mubarak and the democratic forces in Iran and Iraq, why it has let the Kurds down so badly, and why it consented to be taken over the barrel by Pakistan, which never ceased to support Taliban factions in Afghanistan that were killing American and NATO soldiers every week. The Russians are back in the Middle East (in Syria) for the first time since 1973, and are directly

engaged there militarily for the first time ever. Given the overwhelming strength of the U.S. Air Force and Naval Air Forces, the insolent Russian command for the United States last week to vacate Syrian airspace within an hour, before it bombed factions allied to the U.S., would, under any president of the U.S. since the first flight of the Wright Brothers (1903), have led to a rejoinder that would have caused Russia to amend its behavior. This administration sulked off and whined about “unprofessional” Russian conduct.

Apart from expelling Saddam from Kuwait and the summary execution of Osama bin Laden (whom our Pakistani allies had been sheltering), none of any of it has made any sense since Camp David. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the U.S. to assemble coalitions to support its wildly varying Middle East enterprises. All civilization except the fragile king of Jordan joined the first Gulf War to evict Saddam from Kuwait. No country seriously opposed chasing the Mullah Omar and bin Laden out of Afghanistan. Recruitment was pretty patchy for the Second Iraq War, and there is a distinct lack of confidence in the anti-ISIS operation, which Obama modestly presented to the American people as “American leadership at its best.” Erratic leadership ends up without many voluntary followers.

The Arab powers are unanimous in their hate for Assad, as an Iranian stooge. It will not be long before the Arabs find the Russian presence among them quite irritating, as Sadat did more than 40 years ago, and especially as the Russians are propping up what they consider to be a turncoat Iranian Trojan Horse. As long as Iran doesn't blow up the region with its newly legitimized nuclear weapons after rushing them to completion and deployment, either directly or by giving them to terrorist organizations, it seems inevitable that a regional carve-up of spheres of influence will occur eventually. Any plausible American presidential candidate – while his pledges to “rip up the nuclear agreement with Iran”

are just bravura, as that would isolate America and be an unwise violation of international law – will hold Iran to the letter of the agreement. Post-Obama, mercifully, a violation by Iran will not lead to the fiction of “snapback sanctions,” but to the darkening of the skies of Persia by U.S. air power, in whatever numbers and with whatever frequency of return is necessary to disincentivize the Tehran theocracy from achieving deliverable nuclear weapons.

A serious American administration, and there is ample reason for hope that one will be elected next year, could play a valuable role in finding a durable evolution from the hegemony of the Ottoman Empire, which the British and French tried unsuccessfully to rewrite after World War I. Apart from a special status for Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, the Turks, Iranians, and Egyptians will assert more or less demarcated spheres of influence between themselves, and the Saudis will protect and mentor the Gulf States. If there were any justice, the Kurds would at least have an autonomous zone in northern Iraq, but there is little justice in the Middle East and the Kurds are more likely to be partitioned again, as they have been, like Poland in the 18th century.

Russia and the West can presumably help semi-civilized Sunni elements in Syria and Iraq from being taken over by ISIS, which is reassuringly small though irrationally barbarous. If the Kurds can defeat ISIS, as they have, the sane Syrians and Iraqis can, especially with the support of the Iranians, Saudis, Russians, and the West, and despite the outrageous meddling of the Turks. But Assad is ultimately doomed, which, along with the influx of Syrians into Lebanon, should end Iran’s ability to torment and provoke Israel via Hezbollah, which became preeminent in Lebanon thanks to George W. Bush’s enthusiasm for democracy in inappropriate places. With Israel surrounded by a benign Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan (which is increasingly dependent on Israeli offshore energy resources), with the local Sunni Arabs becalmed under some sort of Turco-

Egyptian suzerainty, the Palestinians would finally have to become somewhat serious about a two-state solution that accepts Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state and with the right of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to Palestine.

It is possible to imagine an optimistic end to the present chaos. But it will take some time for this country to live down the disasters of the last two presidencies.

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