

Understanding the Middle East chaos at its core: A struggle for belonging and immortality

by Louis René Beres

Taken by itself, the election of the next American president, Democrat or Republican, will have little or no discernible impact on Middle Eastern chaos. To make any meaningful difference to this still-expanding problem, American decision-makers would first need to look behind the news. Only after such a penetrating look, could our country's next president ever hope to progress beyond uttering useless second-order narratives of regional names, places, and ideologies.

Should this core obligation to look beneath the surface be declined yet again, our national government (and certain other allied governments) would remain unable to implement any meaningful remedies. At that point, only a continuous regional disintegration, – along with vast new legions of Middle Eastern refugees – could be expected. Ironically, the required forms of improved understanding regarding Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and the wider region are unhidden. After all, for literally millennia, nothing here has really changed. Rather, from the beginning, war and genocide have stemmed from seemingly fixed and universal human needs to belong and never to die.

In essence, in area geopolitics, the personal and the political have always been more-or-less interdependent. Today, moreover, when we can better understand that geopolitics is not geometry, and that sometimes, at least, the geopolitical whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, we should start to recognize not just interdependence, but also “synergy.” Indeed, no one can persuasively purport to

understand Middle East chaos without first being willing to consider regional geopolitical relationships in their most fully reciprocal and complex expressions.

There is more. Inevitably, such willingness will bring the strategist or analyst back to the individual human being. Inevitably, all area geopolitics will be contingent upon the specific wants and behaviors of this single human person, which are casually observable and readily predictable.

For the moment, what we still stubbornly choose to recognize and emphasize in world politics is merely epiphenomenal, for example, the size and the presumed "order-of-battle" of enemy forces. This means that whatever we decide to emphasize in such politics has remained largely a passive reflection of deeper truth, just a flimsy shadow of what is happening, "underneath," amid the underlying and shifting strata of area policies and social dissolution.

Why not, for the future, look elsewhere, look underneath, directly?

To try and "fix" Islamic Middle Eastern chaos by imposing yet another contrived amalgam of military and political responses would once again miss the point. The core problem, our leaders, both Democrat and Republican, should finally understand, is not narrowly political or military. It is, rather, very deeply "psychological," and also, very broadly "civilizational." To be sure, it will be difficult to get our next president, to make the needed shift in orientation – especially because what is genuinely necessary is simultaneously less tangible or calculable – but there is no plausible American alternative to accepting a much greater tolerance of ambiguity in US strategic planning.

The "real world" of Middle Eastern chaos is ambiguous. There is no point to overlooking this staggering complexity, or simply pretending that it need not impact our pertinent

regional policies. At the same time, beneath this ambiguity and searing chaos lies a decipherable and plainly longstanding corpus of individual human needs. Among these needs, moreover, none is more harshly compelling, or authentically causal, than the unwavering human desire to belong, and, to live perpetually.

Once, Picasso had reminded us that “art is a lie that lets us see the truth.” Further along this *avant garde* line of thinking, Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti’s *Man Pointing* offers a potentially illuminating representation of pervasive human isolation and alienation, a troubling image that could nonetheless begin to lead us toward a far deeper understanding of genocide, war, and terrorism. Such an understanding could then produce much more thoughtful and correspondingly more auspicious American foreign policies.



Normally, as Giacometti’s art hints at obliquely, each individual person can feel empty and insignificant apart from membership in some sort of crowd. Sometimes, this presumptively sustaining crowd is the ‘State.’ Sometimes, it is the ‘Tribe.’ Sometimes, as with ISIS, or Hezbollah, or Muslim Brotherhood, it is, at least residually, the Faith. Sometimes, it is the self-proclaimed “Resistance Movement,” as in the fiendishly similar examples of Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad, or still-other relentlessly murderous terror groups.

Art is a lie that may help us to see the truth. “Reading” Giacometti’s emaciated figure, the outlines of a distinctly pragmatic conclusion may appear:

Unless we humans can finally learn how to temper our overwhelming and nearly-ubiquitous desire to belong at all costs, our recurrent military and political schemes to remedy genocide, war, and terrorism will inevitably fail.

Without augmentation by far more basic sorts of human

transformations – namely, changes that produce more expressly individualistic human beings – these time-dishonored strategies for national security, collective security (United Nations), or collective defense (alliances) will continue to be ineffectual.

It is largely this craving for membership and, as corollary, craving for belonging, that threatens to subvert individual moral responsibility, and, thereby, to ignite monumental crime. The lethal consequence of such intersecting cravings, as humankind has been witnessing from time immemorial, is a convulsive and sometimes orgasmic triumph of collective will. The most easily recognized twentieth-century case of such a grotesque triumph, of course, is Nazi Germany, an instructive observation already perfectly obvious to anyone who has seen Leni Riefenstahl's infamous 1935 film, *Triumph of the Will*.

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Not every human crowd or herd need be insidious or destructive; not even in the Middle East. Still, grievously ongoing crimes against humanity could never take place in the absence of such collectivities. Whenever individuals join together and form a crowd or herd, certain latently destructive dynamics of mob psychology are made available for explosive release. Significantly, this fateful combining of membership with destructiveness lowers each affected person's ethical and intellectual level to a point where even *crimes against humanity* may become acceptable. In the case of such barbarous groups as ISIS, the rabidly murderous behavior is not merely agreeable to the membership. It is also deeply welcome, satisfying, and lascivious, a viscerally continuous source of unparalleled ecstasy.

On the surface, ongoing brutalities in the Islamic Middle East represent fragmenting struggles between assorted warring herds. These herds, in turn, are the product of certain critically underlying individual needs to belong. These needs are themselves derived from the most primary human want of all. This, our leaders must finally understand, is the generally unquenchable yearning for immortality.

Understood as pathology, the current chaos in the Islamic Middle East remains only a symptom. But, as an appropriately aesthetic start to more promising and enduring policy solutions, Giacometti's *Man Pointing* may be taken as an imaginative signpost of what is typically most determinative in spawning war, terrorism, and genocide. Sooner or later, what is happening here and elsewhere will need to be "fixed" at the "molecular" level of conflict, that is, at the needful level of the individual human being.

In the Middle East, geopolitics is merely a secondary reflection of something much more primary. This "something" is the unrelieved yearning of individuals for both belonging and immortality. Unless we finally begin to acknowledge the ubiquity and core importance of twin human longings for membership and immortality, our foreign policies there will assuredly fail. It follows that for the upcoming American presidential election, it is now finally time for all candidates to "take Giacometti seriously."

The sculptor's figure already knows where he is pointing. We, too, should try to find out. The alternative is simply another endless cycle of war, terrorism, and genocide.

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