Middle East Meltdown: Causes and Consequences for the U.S.

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What I am going to do is be relatively brief here and just lay out some organizing concepts that I have found helpful in trying to understand the unprecedented tumult of the broader Middle East. First let me define my terms. When I say broader Middle East, it is that swath of land from Morocco on the Atlantic coast of North Africa, all the way through North Africa, into the countries of the Levant, that is, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Lebanon, the Arabian Peninsula anchored by Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and then the non-Arab countries to the east: Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. They have different languages, different cultures, different religions, but they all share a roughly similar world view that is formed in no small part by the fact that every one of those countries, with the exception of the interior of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, every one of those countries has been occupied by one or more Western powers since Napoleon Bonaparte went into Egypt in 1798. We do not think of the Middle East as occupied countries; we do not see ourselves as occupiers.

That is not how Middle Easterners view it. They very much see us in that light, and it affects what we are dealing with today. The modern Middle East is roughly 100 years old. It dates back to the Treaties of Versailles and Sèvres after World War I. That literally drew the lines on the map that still exist today. In that hundred years, we have never seen a more chaotic and turbulent time than we see today. We are used to a Middle East where there are revolutions and coups and governments are overthrown, but what we are seeing now is something far starker. We are seeing states fail, countries collapse. Syria—a completely failed state. Libya, Yemen—all completely failed states. Iraq is right on the edge, maybe going over it. Afghanistan will be there too if we decide we are tired of it all and we pull out the last of
our troops. With the failure of states, we are seeing something else that is quite disturbing. It is the rise of non-state actors. They come in several categories. There are those that are state-sponsored. That would be, for example, Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia that has done so much harm to that country, to Israel, and now to Syria. Then there are the actors who do not have state sponsorship, most prominently Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. It is a new phenomenon in the Middle East and is no longer just restricted to the Middle East. You also have Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Northwest Africa. When states fail, non-state actors rise. It is a new regional disorder, very grave in its implications for security there and throughout the world, including in our own country.

With the various conflicts we see in Syria, in Yemen, in Iraq, there is an overarching construct that I call the Middle East Cold War and it has two principle protagonists (not the US and Russia): Saudi Arabia and Iran—the citadel of Sunni Islam versus the citadel of Shia Islam—which means that these conflicts around the region are increasingly denominated in sectarian terms. There has been a tendency in this country to leap past that to say, “Well it has always been a religious war. It has gone on for 1500 years and will go on for another 1500 years and there is nothing we can do about it.” Not exactly. At the time of my first tour in the Foreign Service, which was in the Iran of the Shah, we were relying post-Vietnam on a twin pillar of gulf security and those two pillars were Saudi Arabia and Iran, working very closely with us, working very closely with each other. It did not matter that one was Sunni and the other was Shia—to the extent that the Shah sent a brigade to the Arabian Peninsula to help the Sultan of Oman put down a communist-backed insurrection, and that was perfectly fine with the Saudis (in fact, the Saudis were part of the coordination to get the Iranians there). Just worth bearing in mind, this is not a millennial struggle between Shia and Sunni. Sectarian differences have always been there, virtually since the dawn of Islam, but very rarely have they been expressed in violent terms. Let me just give you another example particularly as we worry about, if you will, Islamic terrorism. Well, there is something inherent in Islam that tends to violence, if not
outright terror, and it has always been that way. I am old enough to remember another era of Middle Eastern terror. This was in the late sixties and through the decade of the seventies. This was Palestinian terror. Palestinian groups did a whole lot of damage in Israel and elsewhere. They assassinated one of my predecessors as ambassador to Lebanon and two other senior diplomats in Sudan. Were they Islamic fanatics? Well, the most lethal group was the popular front for the Liberation of Palestine and it was headed by George Habash. He was a Christian. The ideology was not only not Islamic, it was atheistic, as was the ideology of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, also headed by a Christian. Again, it helps to understand something of the history and the attendant complexity of this region, its alliances, its ideologies, its purposes. It is way more complicated than the broad brush strokes that paint this as an irresolvable religious struggle or an unending wave of Islamic terrorism. We do ourselves a disservice and a danger by thinking in those overly simplistic terms.

What is going on that has caused states to fail and has caused non-state actors to rise? The organizing principle that I have found to be most useful, the thing I look at the most closely, is governance, or the failure of governance. The Middle East has seen a chronic failure of governance, a failure to establish a consistent rule of law that applies to all, a failure to establish stable institutions that look to the interests of all of the governed. I describe it as a succession of failed -isms. You can start in this hundred-year period, you can start with the failure of colonialism and imperialism. After World War I, the French and the British ran most of the Middle East. What they did not do was spend a lot of time helping to develop indigenous institutions that had legitimacy in the eyes of their own people. Monarchism in the central Middle Eastern countries of Egypt and Iraq also failed and it gave way to yet another –ism: Arab nationalism, Gamal Abdel Nasser being the most famous example. It derived its legitimacy through confrontation with Israel, but Arab nationalism made no particular effort to establish real legitimacy, again by developing institutions and co-defining and enforcing a consistent rule of law. Other -isms also failed. Arab
socialism, Baathism, communism, just undiluted authoritarianism. They all failed and gave way to another -ism. Now we have, if you will, Islamism.

When I ask myself, “How enduring is the Islamic State?” I do not think that much in terms of their military capabilities. I think in terms of their governance. They benefitted from having an incredibly low bar when they moved into parts of Syria and Iraq with good governance as practiced by Bashar al-Assad or the Iraqi regime. You know, not the kind of thing you want to hold up as a great example of state building. And indeed, the Islamic State—they knew this. They may be evil, but they are not stupid. So they made an effort to establish very brutal, but consistent and predictable justice. If you did X, Y was going to happen to you 10 times out of 10. Not Z and not nothing. Why? For people with memories of totally arbitrary and capricious justice, if you can call it that, that was a step forward. But what we have seen lately in the Islamic State, which is hurting for revenues, is the establishment of really extortionate taxes. All taxes are extortionate—April 15 is coming, folks—but we pay our taxes and we actually get services. People under the Islamic State pay taxes and they get nothing. I would predict that the Islamic State will fall apart at some point. Not because of the youth of the American military force, but because they will fail as all their predecessors have failed to provide good governance. Do not feel good about that. There is no such thing as a vacuum, not in nature and certainly not in the Middle East. Something else we cannot even imagine will rise in its place and it is not going to be the Syrian and Iraqi Boy Scouts. It is going to be something pretty awful.

That takes me to us, the United States. The United States has had about a 70-year history in the Middle East that basically goes back to the end of World War II. Before then we were not there. A little bit of oil stuff in Saudi Arabia, we did some great works with education, American University of Beirut and American University of Cairo, medical missionaries throughout the region, but politically we were not there. That was a European thing. The year 1945 changed that. The British and the French were bled white. They could not play their traditional role and you had an ascendant Soviet Union. Basically, Churchill said to us, “You’d
better step up or the Soviets are going to step in.” So we came to the Middle East basically as a Cold War theater and have been prominently engaged ever since. Sometimes that engagement has been positive and constructive. I am the Dean of the George H. W. Bush School, and I am reminded that this month is the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait by the broadest international coalition since World War II that was established by President Bush and Secretary Baker. That not only brought in our traditional European allies, we actually persuaded Egypt and even Syria to send each an armored division to Saudi Arabia as part of that effort. It was a magnificent achievement.

Some of our other achievements have not been so magnificent. I was in Beirut when we kind of thought it would be a good idea if the Israelis invaded Lebanon and got rid of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1982. Who could argue that? Palestinian terrorism had killed a lot of Israelis and a lot of Americans, destabilized Jordan, the list goes on. So sure! It was a good idea. Except it wasn’t, and I was there. Israelis pretty much got rid of PLO, but they created the conditions that led to the rise of something far worse, and that was Hezbollah. And it really was worse. I met last night in Phoenix with an old friend, now a Scottsdale police officer. He was a marine sergeant in Beirut with me in the eighties and we went through the bombing of the embassy in April of 1983 together and obviously both survived it. A lot of us did not. It was the worst single attack on a U.S. diplomatic facility, and it was done by Hezbollah, with Syrian and Iranian support. Six months later, it got even worse—October 1983, the bombing of the marine barracks, 244 dead. We traded the PLO who could kill us in ones or twos and got in exchange a mass murder machine that could kill us by the hundreds.

Why do I tell you this? Because it illustrates one of the very few things I learned in the Middle East over the years, and I am going to tell you everything I learned. Before you panic and start running for the exits, let me assure you it is only two things. The first one is be careful what you get into. Interventions, particularly military interventions in the volatile Middle East, can have extraordinary unintended consequences. Not of the third and fourth order, but the
thirtieth and fortieth order that you cannot begin to predict, let alone plan for. Beirut taught me that lesson 35 years ago. But we are not good at absorbing lessons. So in 2002, the American people basically voted to have a big ol’ war in Iraq through the congressional elections that year, and we did have a big ol’ war in Iraq. Who could quibble with getting rid of the dictator who had invaded two of his neighbors and would invade a third if he got his hands on the wherewithal to do it? Yeah, well again, be careful what you get into. The thirtieth and fortieth order consequences are unimaginable. The rise of sectarian strife as larger identities melted away, the loss of almost 4,500 American service men and servicewomen, and billions and billions of dollars. We got it stabilized on my watch: 2007, 2008, 2009. The violence subsided; political agreements were reached among Sunni, Shia, and Kurds; there was a real national unity government; Iraq actually looked like it had a chance; but then we got tired of it. We decided we did not want to be there anymore. A president was elected to end wars, not perpetuate them. Time to bring the troops home. But here is what happens. You do not end a war by withdrawing your forces. You simply leave the battlespace to your adversaries. From an Iraq in which we saw reasonable stability and the prospect for more, in which our presence was considered a positive element in helping to make the compromises they could not come to on their own, we pulled out in 2011, and how is Iraq occupied today? By Iranians, by extremist Shia militias whose leaders have murdered American service members, and by Islamic State. You know, it exceeds my worst nightmares from the time I left in 2009. That is the second thing I learned: be careful getting in; be just as careful about what you propose to get out of. Disengagement can have consequences as great, or greater, than your original intervention and I would suggest to you in Iraq, we kind of blew it on both. We were not careful getting into it, even though we had the lesson of Lebanon, and we were not careful getting out of it.

That sets the stage for today and I will just conclude with this. If this is the most chaotic and turbulent the Middle East has ever been, this is a moment in which the United States is more disengaged from the area than it has been in the 70 years of
our involvement there. I was out in Lebanon just before Christmas. The universal perception is the United States, at best, has just checked out, we are not involved anymore, and at worst, that we are actually in collusion with the Iranians, with Hezbollah, with Assad, and with the Russians. Events like Secretary Kerry meeting Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Munich (how appropriate—remember Neville Chamberlain in Munich?) foster the impression that we are not confronting the Russians, we are colluding with them as they work with Assad to massacre Syrian civilians by the tens of thousands. The pendulum swung one way to an intervention in 2003 that led to a chain of unintended consequences, and then it swung the other way: “We are done here. We are out. It is not our problem.” Except it is. The Islamic State is most definitely our problem. A flood of refugees greater than at any time since World War II, although we may shut our doors to it, is our problem because it is a global problem. In an election year, my plea for whoever is going to be our next President is pretty simple. Engage. Be involved in the Middle East. I do not mean sending in the Eighty-second Airborne again. I mean not putting boots on the ground, but wingtips and pumps on the ground, on the feet of Foreign Service Officers who know the languages, know the region, know the history, know the culture. Have the Secretary of State camp out in the Middle East, shore up our alliances which have deteriorated badly; have a President who will work the phones with regional leaders. Something again that George Herbert Walker Bush did so brilliantly. This President does not do that and he does not like his Secretary of State to actually take on major diplomatic initiatives in the region. If we did too much in the last decade, I would argue that we are doing way too little now. If you do not get it right in the Middle East it has a way of biting you pretty hard. We need to get back in the game. It is going to be a long year until we have a new administration. I do not expect this administration to do anything of consequence. They are just going to let it ride. That is what happens in the last year of an administration. I hope we can ride it out.

That has all been pretty gloomy I know. I will conclude on a note of what passes for me as optimism. As bad as things are today, and they are
pretty bad, savor the moment. Enjoy it, because three months from now, you are going to look back on today with longing and nostalgia for the good ol’ days because three months from now it is going to be way worse.
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