The Middle East in the New World Disorder
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Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, Ret.)
Senior Fellow, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University
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Not so long ago, Americans thought we understood the Middle East, that region where the African, Asian, and European worlds collide. When the Ottoman Empire disintegrated in World War I, the area became a European sphere of influence with imperial British, French, and Italian subdivisions. The Cold War split it into American and Soviet client states. Americans categorized countries as with us or against us, democratic or authoritarian, and endowed with oil and gas or not. We acted accordingly.

In 1991, the Soviet Union defaulted on the Cold War and left the United States the only superpower still standing. With the disappearance of Soviet power, the Middle East became an exclusively American sphere of influence. But a series of U.S. policy blunders and regional reactions to them have since helped thrust the region into chaos, while progressively erasing American dominance.

In the new world disorder, there are many regional sub-orders. The Middle East is one of them. It is entering the final stages of a process of post-imperial, national self-determination that began with Kemal Atatürk’s formation of modern Turkey from the rubble of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. This process is entrenching the originally Western concept of the nation state in the region. It led to Gamal Abdel Nasser’s repudiation of British overlordship and overthrow of the monarchy in Egypt in 1952, Ayatollah Khomeini’s rejection of American tutelage and replacement of the Shah with the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, and the misnamed “Arab Spring” in 2011. Its latest iteration is unfolding in Saudi Arabia.
In the Middle East, as elsewhere, regional rather than global politics now drives events. The world is reentering a diplomatic environment that would have been familiar to Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston, who served nineteenth century Britain as secretary of war, foreign affairs, and prime minister. In his time, the core skill of statecraft was manipulation of regional balances of power to protect national interests and exercise influence through measures short of war.

Palmerston famously observed that in international relations, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests. In the new world disorder, with its narcissistic nationalism, shifting alignments, and wobbling partnerships, this sounds right, even if national interests are also visibly evolving to reflect fundamental shifts in their international context. Palmerston’s aphorism is a reminder that the flexibility and agility implicit in the hedged obligations of entente – limited commitments for limited contingencies – impart advantages that the inertia of alliance – broad obligations of mutual aid – does not. One way or another, it is in our interest to aggregate the power of others to our own while minimizing the risks to us of doing so.

To cope with the world after the Pax Americana and to put “America first,” we Americans are going to have relearn the classic vocabulary of diplomacy or some new, equally reality-based version of it. If we do, we will discover that, in the classic sense of the word, we now have no “allies” in the Middle East. The only country with which we had a *de jure* alliance based on mutual obligations, Turkey, has *de facto* departed it.

Today, Ankara and Washington are seriously estranged. Turkey is no longer aligned with the United States on any of our major diplomatic objectives in the region, which have been: securing Israel, excluding Russian influence; opposing Iran; and sustaining strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. Americans can no longer count on Turkey to support or acquiesce in our policies toward the Israel-Palestine issue; Syria; Iraq; Iran; Russia; the Caucasus; the
Balkans; Greece; Cyprus; Egypt, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries; the members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; NATO; or the EU.

Having been rebuffed by Europe, Turkey has abandoned its two-century-long drive to redefine its identity as European. It is pursuing an independent, if erratic, course in the former Ottoman space and with Russia and China. The deterioration in EU and US-Turkish relations represents a very significant weakening of Western influence in the Middle East and adjacent regions. As the list of countries Turkey affects suggests, this has potentially far-reaching consequences.

Meanwhile, U.S. relations with Iran remain antagonistic. American policy blunders like the destabilization of Iraq and Syria have facilitated Iran’s establishment of a sphere of influence in the Fertile Crescent. Our lack of a working relationship with Tehran leaves the United States unable to bring our influence to bear in the region by measures short of war. U.S. policy is thus all military, all the time. The White House echoes decisions made in Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. It no longer sets its own objectives and marshals others behind them.

For our own reasons, which differ from country to country, Americans have unilaterally taken under our wing a variety of client states, some of which are each other’s historic antagonists. Our commitments have not changed despite the fact that the regional context of our relationships with our client states and their orientations and activities are all in rapid evolution. Other than Turkey, the United States has never had a Middle Eastern partner that has seen itself as obliged to come to our aid or, indeed, to do anything at all for us except what might serve its own immediate, selfish interests. The obligations all run the other way – from us to them.

During the 1947 - 1989 Cold War, American policy focused on the strategic denial of the Middle East to the Soviet Union. Part of the zero-sum game approach this objective entailed was the designation of the Shah of Iran as our principal security partner in the Persian Gulf. His overthrow caused us to shift to reliance on Saudi Arabia. The desire to block the Soviet Union also inspired our commitment to protect Israel from its Soviet-aligned neighbors.
In September, Paul Pillar spoke to you with characteristic brilliance about the never-ending issues between Israel and Palestine. I will limit myself to adding a bit of regional, strategic, and diplomatic context to what he said. I’d be happy to revisit the issue, among others, when we have a chance to exchange views.

The Euro-American embrace of Zionism after World War II was motivated in large measure by a felt need to atone for the horrors of the Holocaust, which we sometimes forget was an atrocity perpetrated by European Christendom, not Middle Eastern Islam. The establishment of an expansionist, externally-supported Zionist state in Palestine immediately became a major driver of radicalization in the region and among the world's Muslims. The Arab reaction to Israel’s mass expulsion of Palestinian Arabs was to seek revenge on ancient communities of Arab Jews in their midst, inducing them to flee to Israel.

Universal opposition to Zionism continued to fuel anti-Americanism and revolutionary agitation in the Middle East. This facilitated Soviet influence-building there and threatened the ability of conservative Arab and Iranian governments to justify continued alignment with the West. In the 1973 “Yom Kippur War,” the massive resupply of Israel by the United States saved it from defeat but caused most Arab states to break relations with Washington. The American answer to Arab antipathy was the launch of shuttle diplomacy and a so-called “peace process” between Israel, the Palestinians, and Arab states.

But once the Cold War ended, the endlessly unproductive “peace process” lost its most compelling strategic rationale: the diplomatic outflanking of America’s Soviet enemy. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, with no Soviet threat left to drive it, the “peace process” petered out. American presidents no longer saw a persuasive reason to endure the domestic political pain involved in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians. Washington went through the motions for a while and then stopped. This led both the Arabs and Israel to reappraise the United States and its role in their region.
In retrospect, the “peace process” was a highly effective diplomatic equivalent of sleight of hand, diverting international attention from Israeli obduracy, displacing Arab rage at Zionism’s ongoing humiliations of Arab honor, and providing political cover for Israel’s relentless dispossession of the Palestinians from both their homes and their homeland. With American collaboration, Israel was able to use diplomatic pseudo-events and showmanship to string along hopes for Palestinian self-determination even as it eroded the basis for anything other than Palestinian capitulation to eternal subjugation or exile. (Whether or not this will ultimately prove to be a wise survival strategy for Israel is an open question.)

But, when the “peace process” ended, no one could miss the fact that it had been all travel and no arrival. It had not brought peace to the Holy Land, had not secured Israel against the resentments of its Arab neighbors at its imposition on them by British imperialism and its subsequent, repeated humiliations of them, had not achieved regional acceptance for Israel or stabilized Arab-Israeli relations, had not enabled Palestinian self-determination, and had not prevented the gradual transformation of the Israel-Palestine struggle into a war of religion. In terms of its stated objectives, the so-called “peace process” was at best a bust and at worst a fraud.

In the end, the “peace process” dishonored and discredited American diplomacy both globally and in the region. The unilateral American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of a democratic Israel that exercises tyranny over six million Palestinians has disqualified further American mediation. More ominously, it has left Palestinians in the Holy Land and those forced to seek refuge abroad with no route to self-determination other than violence.

There is no reason for us to expect Palestinians to be less resolute in their pursuit of freedom than Christians were in seeking to expel Muslims from Spain, or Irish nationalists were in their efforts to cast out their British oppressors, or Jews were in reestablishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Spanish and Irish Catholics achieved their objectives only after 800 years of uncompromising, violent struggle. Jews kept alive a dream of return to their mythic homeland for almost two
millennia. What ultimately happens in Palestine will be determined by relations between the parties there, not by Americans or Europeans. The path to a stable outcome now looks to be twisted, bloody, and long.

As this century began, the catastrophes wrought by the post-9/11 American interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Syria fatally tarnished the U.S. reputation as a longstanding champion of international law and humanitarianism. The liberal elite in America greeted the surrender of our authoritarian protégé, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, to mob rule in Cairo with evident glee. To others who had relied on American support, this made the United States look not just untrustworthy but perfidious.

This impression only grew when the U.S. acquiesced in a military coup against the democratically elected but singularly inept Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. Toothless American demands for Israel to end ethno-religious discrimination and land grabs irked Israelis. Its inefficacy further undermined U.S. credibility among Arabs. American condemnations of gender apartheid meanwhile annoyed Arabs without persuading them to embrace feminism. The Islamophobic hate speech pouring out of U.S. media plays well in Israel. It is deeply offensive to Muslims everywhere.

The U.S. decision to join other external powers in an Iran nuclear deal vehemently opposed by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. just added to the angst of American client states in the Middle East. *De facto* U.S. facilitation of greatly enhanced Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria left the Gulf Arabs feeling encircled and Israel feeling vulnerable. Iran’s efforts to detach Yemen from Saudi Arabia’s sphere of influence added to the Gulf Arab sense that they were under siege by Iran. The American inability to reverse Iranian gains in regional influence convinced all of America’s protégés that they had to become more self-reliant. They saw Washington’s marshaling of the world’s leading powers at the negotiating table with Tehran as an implicit downgrading of their importance and acceptance of Iran’s status as the region’s greatest power.
America's client states judge that they are now dealing with a patron in increasing internal confusion over the nature and scope of its engagements abroad. They are uncomfortable pinning their safety or their ambitions on a partner in such a state of disarray. The result is a now-well-advanced drive by every American client state in the Middle East to diversify its international relationships to offset and dilute continuing dependence on the United States.

At the same time, the United States has come to be seen by Israel and the Gulf Arabs as manipulable – a nation of unparalleled military strength with no strategic compass, transparently venal politics, and no apparent ability to distinguish its own interests from those of others it has unilaterally undertaken to protect. American client states seem confident they can recruit their patron to support their strategies and absorb the risks of their policies. "I know what America is," Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has said. "America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction. They won't get in the way." He has shown he knows what he’s talking about. And how about the snow job the Saudis did on President Trump in his first foray abroad last May? America is now everywhere treated as the follower, not the leader, in its relationships with Middle Eastern states.

The latest peoples to suffer disillusionment with America are the Kurds and Palestinians, who had allowed themselves to become dependent on U.S. support. It has become apparent to both that the United States will no longer invest in policing the region, much less in shaping and enforcing a regional order conducive to Kurdish or Palestinian statehood. Meanwhile, with its unilateral decision on Jerusalem, Washington has just handed the wedge issue of their dreams to nations and movements seeking to gain influence at American expense in both the region and the broader Muslim world.

The major external beneficiary of receding American influence to date has been Russia, which has added arms sales and military as well as diplomatic cooperation with Egypt, Israel, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.A.E. to strengthened ties with Iran and Syria. But China
is in the wings, and under pressure to take the stage. It will likely do so through participation in the reconstruction of Syria as part of its “Belt and Road Initiative.” And, these days, where China goes, India is sure to follow. India has historically seen Arabia and the Persian Gulf as closely connected to its security and well-being.

In Syria, Russia demonstrated an independent capability to conduct a limited intervention in the Middle East. It also showcased the weaponry it has for sale. Sales are up and Moscow has just added basing rights in Egypt to those it had in Syria.

The United States remains the only external power with the capacity to project massive force into the region. But, since the Gulf War of 1990-91, our military interventions there and in adjacent areas have consistently failed. This has played a large part in causing most in the region to view America not as the solution to their problems but as a major source of geopolitical turmoil and religious strife. Polls show that people in the Middle East now regard the United States as the greatest menaces to peace they face.

Within the Middle East, Iran has been the major beneficiary of America's strategic blunders. Iranian gains have pushed the Saudi-Emirati Gulf Arab diarchy and its allies into an unprecedentedly violent response. The UAE has intervened militarily as far away as Libya. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and they have bankrolled the military dictatorship that succeeded it. They have been merciless in their efforts to dislodge Iranian influence from Yemen. More recently, they have sought to bring Qatar to heel.

Initially, in the “Mashriq“ (the Arab East), the Saudis sought to rally Sunnis against Iranian-aligned Shiites. More recently, they have downplayed sectarianism and focused on the Iranian geopolitical challenge. To the satisfaction of the United States, this has led them to reach out to Shiite-dominated Iraq as well as to Israel.
The Middle East, like American society, has been reshaped by Washington’s post-9/11 decisions to invade, occupy, pacify, democratize, and otherwise transform Afghanistan and Iraq. Sixteen and fourteen years after the United States first launched these wars, they sputter on with no end in sight. The heavy toll on our troops is well known, if not much felt by the American citizenry in whose name they are fighting. So far, over 2,400 American and almost 1,140 allied troops have died in Afghanistan and over 20,000 Americans have been seriously wounded there. Almost 4,500 American soldiers have been killed and nearly 1 million injured in Iraq.

The damage to American society is less often tabulated. These fruitless and counterproductive wars have so far cost the United States at least $5.6 trillion, with the potential, even if we were somehow able to end them today, to rise to more than $7.9 trillion. We have paid for our lurch into widening warfare in the Muslim world with a combination of borrowed money and disinvestment in domestic physical and human infrastructure. The result is not just the imposition of a crushing burden of debt on our posterity, but lost growth and declining U.S. economic competitiveness.

The domestic tranquility of societies in the Middle East has been upended. That of the United States has also been disturbed. Americans have become accustomed to life under surveillance and in an endless state of apprehension about acts of terrorism. This condition has, entirely predictably, eroded our liberties, aggrandized the presidency, and reinforced cowardly herd instincts in Congress. It has helped to impoverish the U.S. middle class while enriching the military-industrial complex and the “cost-plus capitalists” who feed on rake-off's from government outlays. These are structural alterations to the American republic and way of life that will affect both for decades.

Meanwhile, almost no one in America seems to be paying attention to the death toll among the Muslim inhabitants of the countries we have invaded or to the impact of this on the attitudes of their co-religionists elsewhere. Some entirely plausible estimates suggest that the United States has been directly or indirectly responsible for 4 million untimely Muslim deaths since 1990.
The most conservative estimate – that of three dozen scholars associated with Brown University’s Watson Institute – calculates that at least 370,000 people have so far perished in America’s 21st century wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. 600,000 more have died in Syria in conflict catalyzed by the US-sponsored anarchy in neighboring Iraq and fueled by American weapons, training, bombing campaigns, and commandos.

Over the same period, with U.S. financial and material support, Israel has killed over 1,100 Lebanese and about 7,000 Palestinians, only a minority of them combatants. Since 2015, the United States has been a co-belligerent in the bloody Saudi-Emirati intervention in the civil war in Yemen. There, some 10,000 Yemeni civilians have perished and at least four times as many have been wounded amidst a humanitarian crisis that rivals those in Gaza or Syria.

All this leaves a lot of Arab and Pashtun families and individuals obsessed with how to avenge the deaths of those dear to them at the hands of Americans or American protégés like Israel and Saudi Arabia. But the inflammatory effects of U.S. interventions are not limited to Arabs and Pashtuns. As the so-called “global war on terror” has progressed, so has the metastasis of anti-American “terrorism with global reach.”

The United States now has military operations of one sort or another underway in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Chad, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Uganda, and Yemen. Very likely, this is an incomplete list of the wars and co-belligerencies ordained by successive presidents. It should concern Americans that these wars are without exception violations of the United States Constitution, which requires that wars of choice be declared by Congress, not authorized by the president. And it seems certain that there are more wars to come.

Seventeen percent of U.S. Special Forces are currently deployed in Africa, where their primary mission is to help fight armed apostles of political Islam. (Uganda is an exception. There the problem is “political Christianity” in the form of the Lord’s Resistance Army.) The Middle East
has become the malignant center of a spreading contagion that has infected the souls of both Americans and the world's nearly two billion Muslims.

The military defeat of the so-called Islamic Caliphate has excised a cancerous growth from the body politic of the Muslim umma but left its causes and related malignancies unaddressed. There is no reason to expect they will halt their metastasis. The very measures the United States has taken to combat Muslim anti-Americanism are spreading it.

The good news, if it can be called that, is that the counterproductivity of American counterterrorist practices and Washington’s ineffectiveness in isolating Iran have brought about shifts toward self-help by American client states. Some of these have considerable potential. Saudi Arabia, for example, has taken the lead in forming a pan-Islamic anti-terrorist military alliance. It has declared war on the extremists whose distortions of Islamic theology have dishonored and brought disrepute to the doctrines of the 18th century Salafist, Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab, whose teachings are the founding principles of the Saudi state.

As part of this new focus, the Kingdom is sharpening the theological differences between its official interpretation of Islam and the deviant ideology of groups like Al Qaeda and the so-called “Islamic State.” Saudi religious and social practices are becoming more tolerant and less illiberal. There is a battle going on for the rejuvenation of Islam. Riyadh now champions a more moderate and less militant version of the faith than in the past.

In many ways, Saudi Arabia appears to be going through a revolutionary transformation analogous to that in Turkey under Atatürk a century ago. It has moved from consensual decision-making in a system with widely dispersed authority to a concentration of power in its king and his heir apparent. This has kicked changes previously underway into high gear.

The Saudis are re-engineering their economy to rely on the private production of goods and services, rather than royalties from oil and gas. They are reshaping their labor market to reduce
reliance on foreigners and to increase opportunities for women. They are building new industries, including an armaments industry that will reduce their dependence on imports. And, having decided on a course of self-reliance, they are no longer risk averse in their foreign and military policies toward their region.

All of these changes are taking place amidst intensified geopolitical interaction among Iran, Israel, the Saudi-Emirati diarchy, and Turkey. Novel as it seems to us, Palmerston would have seen the emerging pattern of international differentiation as normal. The nations of the region are showing that they can cooperate with each other when they see it as in their interest to do so, despite differences that make them fierce opponents on other matters. For example, the Saudis and Emiratis now openly conduct intelligence liaison and coordinate their anti-Iranian lobbying on Capitol Hill with Israel. At the same time, they remain at loggerheads with Israel on other issues, like Kurdish or Palestinian self-determination. Turkey cooperates with Iran on Kurdish matters, despite being on opposite sides in Syria. And so forth.

How are Americans to cope with this situation, in which we have commitments but no followers in the Middle East? How are we to prevent regional rivalries from embroiling us in the wars of others in which we have no intrinsic interest? How are we to adjust our policies to take account of the changes in the regional geometry that defines our interests?

The Cold War is over. There is no contest with another great power to threaten American influence. Such spheres of influence as there are in the Middle East reflect the rivalry between Israel and the Gulf Arabs on the one hand and Iran or Turkey on the other. U.S. involvement in this rivalry is a matter of choice, not an imperative derived from global strategy. Strategic denial of the region to an external great power is no longer a relevant objective. Americans need to rethink our aims in the Middle East.

The United States no longer leads and protects a bloc of countries threatened by another bloc, as was the case in the Cold War. Americans ourselves have no need for energy imports from the
region. We are once again oil and gas exporters, in competition with Middle Eastern energy producers. There is no inherent reason why we alone should remain responsible for guaranteeing the access of our Cold War allies of China and India to Persian Gulf oil and gas supplies. What burden-sharing is now appropriate and how can we move toward it?

Thanks to persistent American diplomacy at Camp David and elsewhere, Israel no longer faces a credible military threat from any neighbor. With no regional challenger to its military supremacy, Israel has felt free repeatedly to invade Lebanon, to pummel Gaza from the air, and to threaten to bomb Iran. The hostility to Israel of Iran, Arab states, and Turkey is the consequence of Israel’s own decisions not to define its borders and to persist in dispossessing and denying the franchise to the Palestinian Arabs it rules. Why should the United States support the continued expansion of the Zionist state or the consolidation of its version of apartheid?

The United States subsidizes Israel, guarantees its security, and vetoes efforts by the international community to hold it accountable for its multiple violations of international law. This enables Israel to pursue a diplomacy-free, exclusively military strategy for survival in a region where, despite the seventy years it has had to do so, it has made no friends. Israel uses the support and weapons it receives from the United States for its own purposes. Jerusalem pays no heed to the interests or views of the United States – and sometimes actively contradicts or ignores them – as it initiates and conducts its military operations. This is a relationship in need of review and recalibration.

Finally, the United States badly needs to rethink our overall approach to the world’s Muslims and the lands they inhabit. We should by now have learned that poking hornets’ nests is not the best way to discourage them from coming after us. We need to stand back and ally ourselves with those in the Muslim world who are seeking to restore Islam to its traditional tolerance, social justice, and compassion for the disadvantaged. The straight path of Islam, not drone warfare, is the answer to Muslim deviance and disquiet.
We live in an age of fake news and fake leadership. It will not be easy to rediscover reality and redirect our policies to deal with it. But the alternative to doing so is to see our friends and enemies in the Middle East maneuver in ways that risk mounting damage to all concerned, including the United States.

Our difficulties are compounded by the extent to which political correctness and partisanship impede civil dialogue. Israel is a foreign country, not an ethno-religious identity. But no one can offer constructive criticism of Israel and its policies without being smeared as an anti-Semite. No one can propose exploring common interests with Russia without being accused of overlooking its alleged intervention in our internal affairs. No one can suggest dialogue with Iran without being dismissed as advocating appeasement. No one can advocate cooperation with Saudi Arabia or the Emirates without being indicted for ignoring the ongoing tragedy in Yemen.

In the end, to formulate and pursue productive policies in the Middle East, we must first restore civil discourse at home. Only then can we intelligently define our national interests and objectives there. Only then can we hope to achieve affordable security in the new world disorder.