Since the end of the Cold War, we’ve had a lot of very instructive experience in the Middle East. Back in 2010, I compiled the real-time analyses I had made of our policies and their results in a book titled *America’s Misadventures in the Middle East*. The book holds up well as an explanation for the origins and evolution of most of our difficulties in the region. Unfortunately, both the situation in the Middle East and our position there have continued to deteriorate.

This has led me to write to a new book, *America’s Continuing Misadventures in the Middle East*, which picks up where the first book left off. I’d like to thank everyone who has said nice things about it.

What we’re up to now in the region raises the question of how much, if anything, we have learned from all the things that have gone wrong. But it does seem to me that we can confidently draw at least five conclusions:

(1) when people in high places twist intelligence to confirm their political convictions, unpleasant surprises and strategic setbacks are likely to follow;

(2) threat assessments inflate to fill the policy criteria and agendas of those whose budgets depend on them;

(3) if a nation (no matter how great and powerful) acts without first asking “and then, what?,” the chances are excellent that it will not like the results;

(4) there are not many problems that can be solved by the use of force alone, but there are almost none that can’t be made worse by it; and

(5) a country with no credible enemies is yet vulnerable to ruin by allies and friends.

In the Middle East, we have found out the hard way that not every cakewalk puts cake on your plate. And it has become apparent that, when they encounter reality, some of the most popular conceits of neo-conservatism and new-age national security policy shrivel up and die. At least the following six neoconservative axioms turn out to be false.

(1) wars in the Middle East can easily be made to pay for themselves;
inside every Arab there lurks a liberal democrat yearning to get out;

if you kick the natives hard enough they will turn into the moral equivalent of Canadians – meek, unfailingly polite to everyone, and misty-eyed about Israel;

in addition to the gerbils who inhabit there, the deserts are full of Arab moderates eager to risk their lives by bravely making war on savage Islamist fanatics;

exiles say what they mean and mean what they say; and

if we sock it to terrorists over there, they won’t dare follow us home.

The cost of the experience that has refuted these delusions has been considerable. It starts with a lot of dead and maimed soldiers and mercenaries as well as $6 trillion in outlays and unfunded liabilities. The dead and wounded came home. The money will never return. It was poured into the sands of West Asia and North Africa or ripped off by contractors. The fact that it was not invested in the general welfare and domestic tranquility of the United States accounts for our broken roads and rickety bridges, the educational malnutrition of our youth, and our reduced international competitiveness.

But our misadventures in the Middle East have had plenty of consequences abroad as well as here at home. These include the eruption of tribal and sectarian conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen; escalating proxy wars between Saudi Arabia and Iran; a putrefied peace process between Israel, the Palestinians, and other Arabs; the gradual self-transformation of Egypt into the political equivalent of an IED; continuing impasse with Iran; diminished respect for us by allies in Europe; and the ongoing metastasis of terrorism with global reach. Our homeland is shabbier and we are less, not more secure than we were.

Terrorists explain that they are over here because we are over there. Our political leaders keep saying that they can’t possibly have that right. Surely, they hate us because of who we are, not what we’ve done and where. Really? To assert this overlooks the magnitude of our accomplishments in the Middle East.

Over the first sixteen years of this century alone, we have helped to engineer structural change that is unprecedented since Napoleon inaugurated the European drive to vivisect the Ottoman Empire and impose secular forms of governance in place of Islam. Our invasion of Iraq led to the reopening of the fissures Mr. Sykes and Monsieur Picot created when they sliced up Greater Syria in 1916. As a result, the states that British and French colonialism carved out of the dying Ottoman order – Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria – are all in various stages of actual or impending collapse.

New states based on ethnic or religious identities seem to be coming into being – Kurdish, Alawite, Salafi, Shiite, Houthi, and so forth. Each of these broken bits of the last hundred years’ political geography has different external patrons. None is sure to survive. The kaleidoscope is still turning in the Middle East.
In a region where faith defines identity, our interventions have catalyzed the transformation of the religious landscape. With backing from wealthy Americans, Jewish tribalism is erasing democracy and Western values (including Diaspora Jewish values) in Israel. Political Islam – both Sunni and Shi`i – has emerged as a major threat to secularism and a source of terrorism not just in the Middle East but beyond it.

Wars of religion comparable to the Thirty Year War between Catholics and Protestants have replaced peaceful coexistence between Sunni and Shi`i Arabs. Jewish colonialism and Muslim extremism have expelled or exterminated the ancient Christian communities of Palestine, Iraq, and Syria. Barring the “second coming,” the Middle East, where Christianity originated two millennia ago, seems likely now to remain a largely Christian-free zone.

Meanwhile, as American bombs plunge down on them from aircraft and drones, Islamist terrorist movements – a localized problem as the century began – have dispersed. They now control large swaths of territory and significant populations in Afghanistan, the Levant, Libya, Pakistan, the Sahel, the Sinai, Somalia, and Yemen. They have also gained a significant presence among disaffected Muslims in Western Europe. Islamophobia plus blowback have begun to produce a similar presence here. Anti-Western terrorism with global reach, unheard of before 9/11, has become an obsession in both the United States and Europe.

Finally, after several decades on the ropes, Russia is back in the ring in the Middle East. It is playing a skillful politico-military hand in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, if not with Turkey. And, whatever they think about Russia, every major security client of the United States in the region – including Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – now openly derides and seeks to hedge against America as a security partner. Iran agrees with them in their distrust of us, if not about anything else. That is one reason that Tehran shows very little desire to pursue a partnership or even a dialogue with Washington.

Many in the region find that last point reassuring. I don’t. On the evidence so far, we can’t hope to deal with violent politics in the Muslim world without Muslim political partners, Shi`ite as well as Sunni. Allowing Islamophobia and drone warfare to define our relationship with the Muslim fourth of humankind is a very large mistake.

Donald Rumsfeld, the Yoda of the Pax Americana, once sagely proclaimed that the metric for success in the “Global War on Terror” was whether we were capturing, killing, deterring, or dissuading more terrorists than were being recruited, trained, and deployed against us. The answer is now in. Drone warfare and assassination don’t do in terrorism; they ramp it up. Muslim rage, reprisal, and revanchism are political problems that are exacerbated rather than ameliorated by air strikes and collateral damage.

This is because, even if you kill the leaders you are aiming at rather than just their followers and family members, you can’t decapitate a state of mind or a network. It’s because drone warfare is justified by body-count calculations that are even more misguided and counterproductive than they were in figuring out who was winning in Vietnam. It’s because for every anti-American terrorist you kill, you get ten free. It’s because the abandonment of due process in determining
whose life to terminate costs you the moral high ground. It’s because declaring that all Muslim males of military age are “militants” who deserve to die does not make that so. Nor does defining all those killed by drone strikes, regardless of age or gender, to have been terrorists make their deaths any less contemptible, odious, and worthy of revenge in the eyes of those who loved them.

The fact is that we have a failing military and paramilitary campaign against Islamist terrorists, not a strategy – still less, a winning strategy – for defeating them. Those who argue for more of the same must explain why what we have been doing has not made things better and why they have instead become steadily worse. We need a better answer than the usual within-the-Beltway one of reinforcing failure with more money and redoubled effort.

So far I’ve talked about the sources of our problems. Let me turn to the methods for dealing with them. I need to do this to be able to collect the Nobel prize I promised my mother I’d earn.

But before I do – talk about different approaches that might actually work, that is – I should say a few words about what’s at stake for America in the Middle East. In that region, the United States is now locked in death-filled dances with fanatic enemies, ungrateful client states, alienated allies, and resurgent adversaries. And no one can tell us how any of this will end. It’s understandable that growing numbers of Americans want out. Some say that the United States no longer has any real interests in the Middle East so Americans should cut our losses, cease meddling, and let God straighten out the mess we’ve made.

But, in foreign affairs, interests are the measure of all things.

And the Middle East is still where Africa, Asia, and Europe meet. That makes it both the mother of all strategic chokepoints and the geographic axis of the world’s transportation routes, as the growing global dominance of Gulf Arab airlines is demonstrating. The ability to transit the Middle East is essential to U.S. global power projection. A decision to write off the region would be a decision to go out of business as a world power. That is something quite distinct from becoming more restrained in using our military power – which I and a growing number of Americans think would be a good idea.

And the Middle East is still where two-thirds of the world’s oil is located. The exploitation of tight oil in shale has made the United States once again an oil exporter, but it hasn’t altered the fact that energy prices are set on a global basis, not by the U.S. market. Middle Eastern oil remains the key determinant of long-term energy costs and energy costs are a crucial factor in the health of the global economy. The quality of life in America depends importantly on prosperity beyond our borders. We cannot ignore the impact of developments in the Middle East on our national well-being.

And the Middle East is still the focus of the world’s most stridently self-righteous, schismatic, and pugnacious religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What happens in and around their holy places affects the moral convictions, emotional balances, and political judgments of global communities consisting of billions of human beings. As we have seen, events in the region that involve religion can decide whether there is domestic tranquility or turbulence not just there but
For all these reasons as well as others, the United States needs effective working relationships with the countries of the Middle East. The region is also full of unfinished American foreign policy projects, some of which are not unimportant. Our decades-long effort to achieve acceptance for a Jewish state there has faltered, if not yet definitively failed. Are we prepared to abandon that project? Our military interventions have produced anarchy in the region and an outflow of refugees from it that threatens to swamp Europe. This has made more enemies for our country than anything else in its 240-year history as an independent nation. Can we now just walk away from the mess we helped make and assume it won’t follow us home?

We have no choice but to remain engaged with the Middle East and with our partners there. I use the word, “partners” advisedly. The term “ally” does not fit our security relationships in the Middle East. Our relationships with countries there do not encompass mutual obligations. We have volunteered to protect them. They have made no such commitment to us. Their relations with us are transactional, no longer based on allegiance.

So, in return for support from us for their interests, the Saudis allow us to overfly their territory. For the same reason, they cooperate with us against Islamist terrorists. But, as Israel has recently gone out of its way to demonstrate, none of our partners in the region feels that it is under any obligation either to support or to refrain from opposing us. And when our partners don’t back us – or when they actively undercut us – we impose no consequences. That amounts to fostering moral hazard through enablement. It is not friendship, anymore than giving money to an alcoholic, knowing that he will use it to buy liquor, guzzle it, and then get behind the wheel of his car, is friendship.

We have led our protégées in the Middle East to expect that the United States can always be counted upon to ensure that stupid or self-destructive behavior on their part will have no political or military consequences for them. We veto criticism of them by the international community. We resupply the ordnance they expend even when they use it in ways that violate our laws and contradict our stated policies. We lean on our allies elsewhere to support them. We tolerate their open intervention in our politics to extract financial and military aid. The unconditionality of American backing for our clients in the Middle East explains their lack of concern about the adverse consequences of their actions and their lack of interest in correcting policies that are not just failing but counterproductive. Their behavior is a major cause of the instability, anarchy, and warfare in the region. And these conditions are the source of the blowback that now disturbs our domestic tranquility.

It’s time to recalibrate our relationships in the Middle East to take realistic account of the circumstances that three decades of policy error and failure have wrought. We need to focus on the protection of American interests rather than on support for the policies of partners who believe and act as though they owe us nothing and who have an appalling record of misjudging their own interests and the likely consequences of their actions. I have a few simple suggestions.

First. Stop trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. The states and borders that have been shattered can’t now be restored. Attempts to reconstruct the arrangements imposed under
Sykes-Picot don’t just waste American money and prestige, they cost American and Arab lives and rationalize terrorist reprisal against the United States. The people of the region are demonstrating their determination to govern themselves within borders they establish for themselves. Instead of resisting such self-determination, the United States should focus on working with partners in the region to ensure that the restructuring of the region’s borders does as little harm as possible to U.S. and allied interests.

By any standard, Da’esh – the so-called “caliphate” – is too vile to be allowed to become one of the new states in the region. But no coalition formed to defeat it can succeed without accommodating self-determination by other religious and ethnic communities.

Second. Work with partners in the region to push for a bargain like that which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe in 1648. The Treaty of Westphalia established an interfaith modus vivendi – CVIVS REGIO EIVS RELIGIO – a principle of live and let live for diverse beliefs and religious practices within Christendom.

Islam stipulates that there can be no compulsion in religion. The violation of this principle through takfīr [تكفير] – the excommunication of others as non-believers deserving of death for apostasy – is at the heart of the warped version of Islam that Da’esh and other Islamist terrorists profess. It is takfīr that provides the rationale for murder on behalf of political grievances and resentments. In the interest of its own security and well-being as well as that of the region, the West must help the conservative Muslims of the Middle East, none of whom approve of takfīr, to ban it, criminalize it, and shut it down.

Third. Work to restore America’s reputation for reliability as a partner and for good faith in the implementation of the agreements we make with others. Our most important collaborators in the Middle East saw our almost gleeful abandonment of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as proof that Washington is not just unreliable, but treacherous. (Putin’s Russia has stood by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in part to draw an invidious comparison with perceived American perfidy.)

No one will do deals with us, as the late Colonel Qaddafi did, if the reward we confer for that is death by sodomy with a butcher knife celebrated with the words: “we came, we saw, he died.”

And what are other countries to make of our effective denial to Iran of the sanctions relief we and others promised it in return for rolling back its nuclear program and subjecting it to stringent international supervision? Belatedly tying our implementation of our part of the nuclear deal to post-deal developments on issues outside its purview is gaining us a reputation for moving the goal posts. If we agree to do something, others must be confident that we’ll do it. If we give our word, we must keep it.

Fourth. Wean Israel from its nearly seventy years of welfare dependency, relieve U.S. taxpayers of the burden of subsidizing it despite its wealth, and stop enabling its government to do stupid stuff that trades gratification today for reduced prospects of survival as a secure democracy tomorrow. Or if subsidies must for some reason continue, condition them on Israeli policies that gain the Jewish state long-term security through peaceful coexistence with its Arab neighbors.
Demand Israel’s support for U.S. interests in the region rather than its current active opposition to U.S. policies directed at serving those interests (as well as – in many instances – its own).

Apply the same approach to relations with other client states in the Middle East. No more something-for-nothing transactions. No more creation of moral hazard through the assumption of risks for client states that enables them to act against U.S. advice and undercut U.S. interests. No more Gazas, Lebanons, or Yemens.

Fifth and finally. Define U.S. objectives in the Middle East and develop a strategy to achieve them that both relies on more than military power and that can enlist the active support of other global and regional powers as well as conservative Muslims. There are many instruments of statecraft other than the use of force – for example, propaganda, clandestine support for foreign causes, and diplomacy to build coalitions and alliances and bend others to support US-led policies.

Unite the Security Council to define terrorism, criminalize it, and establish model national legislation for dealing with it. Work out a division of labor with Muslim allies against Da’esh and takfīr. Recognize that, despite differences on other matters, all great powers share interests in containing and defeating violent Islamism and in preserving access to the energy resources of the Middle East. Demand contributions from others to these causes rather than continuing to assume sole responsibility for them. Develop relations with Iran and with the region’s non-state actors to the extent these serve U.S. interests. Allow no partner to veto U.S. relations with any other.

And to understand how we came to the dilemmas we now face in the region, read America’s Continuing Misadventures in the Middle East...!