The Failure of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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Richard Falk
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While focusing on the “failure” of American foreign policy in the Middle East it is relevant to acknowledge that given the circumstances of the region failure to some degree was probably unavoidable. The argument put forward here is that the degree and form of failure reflected avoidable choices that could and should have been corrected, or at least mitigated over time, but by and large this has not happened and it is important to understand why. This analysis concludes with a consideration of three correctible mistakes of policy.

It is also true that the Middle East is a region of great complexity reflecting overlapping contradictory features at all levels of political organization, especially the interplay of ethnic, tribal, and religious tensions internal to states as intensified by regional and geopolitical actors pursuing antagonistic policy agendas. Additionally, of particular importance recently is the emergence of non-state actors and movements that accord priority to the establishment and control of non-territorial political communities, giving primary legitimacy to Islamic affinities while withdrawing legitimacy from the modern state as it took shape in Western Europe. Comprehending this complexity requires attention to historical and cultural background, societal context, and shifting grand strategies of geopolitical actors.
From many points of view American foreign policy in the Middle East has been worse than a disappointment. It has been an outright failure, especially in the period following the 9/11 attacks of 2001. Even such an ardent supporter and collaborator of the U.S. government as Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, has acknowledged as much in a recent set of comments where he basically says that the West has tried everything, and whatever the tactics were relied upon, the outcome was one of frustration and failure. In Blair’s telling words: “We have tried intervention and putting down troops in Iraq; we’ve tried intervention without putting in troops in Libya; and we’ve tried no intervention at all but demanding regime change in Syria. It’s not clear to me that, even if our policy did not work, subsequent policies would have worked better”.¹ In Blair’s either/or world the political imagination is militarized to the extent that the only viable alternatives are to intervene or not to intervene, suggestive of that most celebrated of binaries, Hamlet’s “to be or not to be,” an utterance relating to whether or not he should kill the usurping king, the presumed murderer of his father.

Several comments are worth observing: first, the scope of inquiry in Blair’s comment is limited to an assessment of military intervention as a tactic, without any consideration of diplomacy or respect for the dynamics of self-determination; secondly, the “we” in his comments is the West, which mainly has meant the United States, rather than the UN or the wider international community; it is a geopolitical “we”; thirdly, the fact that intervention violates the UN Charter and international law is irrelevant for a post-colonial advocate of Western militarism, such as Blair. This comment is revealing in the same way that Sherlock Holmes famously perceived the nature of a crime by noticing that a dog was not barking in its habitual manner, that is, identifying what is omitted from Blair’s assessment is far more interesting and illuminating than what is acknowledged, which is the frustrations of interventionist statecraft in the Middle East; fourthly, it is a misrepresentation of Western policy toward the Syrian conflict to classify it as an instance of “nonintervention” because there has been no concerted air campaign or ground forces mounted by external actors; fifthly, and perhaps most important of all, Blair’s focus on intervention as a Western instrument to control behavior in particular countries does not attempt to encompass the blowback or boomerang effects of intervention as being increasingly unconstrained by the territorial geography of the combat zone; this extra-regional extension of intervention is being most vividly experienced in the contradictory forms of the migration crisis and the horrifying Paris attacks; the point here being that the reverberations of Western intervention can no longer be reliably confined to non-Western battlefields as was the case during the colonial era.

Tom Mayer gives a more satisfactory gloss on this same range of experience. Mayer is a peace activist in Boulder Colorado who manages a very perceptive listserv with

¹ David Swanson, “Tony Blair is Sorry, a Little,” available at: http://davidswanson.org/node/4960.
the name “Just Peace in the Middle East.” His assessment: “US military intervention has been a calamity in the Middle East. They have destroyed Iraq, destabilized Libya, fostered dictatorship in Egypt, accelerated civil war in Syria, and the destruction of Yemen, and helped squelch a pro-democracy movement in Bahrain” (Oct. 25, 2015). The difference in outlook between Blair and Mayer is evident: Blair is exclusively concerned with whether Western policy attained its goals or not, while Mayer emphasizes the harmful effects on the society that is on the receiving end of intervention. Blair epitomizes what I regard as an obsolete yet dangerous form of “geopolitical thinking” while Mayer focuses on the primacy of people and the suffering brought about by a misguided reliance on military solutions for conflicts in the Middle East. Mayer’s consequentialist thinking is also like Blair, not overtly sensitive to the relevance of restraints associated with the United Nations or international law but puts all his emphasis on the effects of these Middle Eastern uses of force. He also does not here mention the post-colonial globalization of conflict, the non-localization of Western political violence in the non-Western world, or more dramatically, the recourse by non-Western extremist forms of resistance to striking back at Western civilian or “soft” targets. In my view, this last point is great significance signaling the end of a long era of one-sided violence in which non-Western resistance was confined to the territorial limits of the combat zone.

II

Before proceeding on the facile assumption of the “failure” of American foreign policy in the Middle East, it is illuminating to consider alternative interpretations of recent developments.

There are important senses in which American foreign policy in the Middle East has not failed given certain assumptions about its character and priorities. If U.S. priorities are oil, Israel, non-proliferation, and the containment of political Islam, then American policy in the region, despite the collateral devastation and suffering entailed, has been surprisingly successful. For decades U.S. strategic relationships with the Gulf states have been successfully balanced with support for Israel. Oil has continued to keep the world economy going at affordable prices during a period when additional energy sources outside the region have been under development and exploration. After being a strategic burden during the early stages of its existence, Israel emerged as a valued strategic asset and partner with the United States in the region, especially since 1967. The U.S. together with Israel has successfully challenged all instances of the threatened proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, while quite remarkably enabling Israel to maintain its regional monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, even to the extent of being insulated from criticism and pressure that should have been expected given such a blatant double standard as well as its process of covert acquisition.²

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Beyond these central points, it is relevant that both Israel and Saudi Arabia are also valued as major purchasers of American weaponry, and that Israel has field tested new tactics and weaponry in relation to the Palestinians that seem to have had a particular influence on Washington since the 9/11 attacks. Israel has joined with Washington in the development of counter-terrorism doctrine and tactic in all phases, including shared intelligence. In addition, Saudi Arabia has, despite its own fundamentalist orientation, operated as an unlikely counterweight in the region to the spread of Islamic radicalism, especially due to its bitter rivalry with Iran and hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, by relying on the cool abstractions of geopolitics it is possible to make a strong case for concluding that U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, given the priorities, has been a success, and the current devastation chaos, and oppressiveness in several of the countries is a diversionary sideshow that should not be understood as outweighing the benefits.

It must be acknowledged that this positive assessment is no very convincing given the inability to prevent the turbulence of the Middle East from spilling over to the West is taken into account. The migration crisis confronting Europe and the extra-regional terrorism of jihadism must now be included in any credible calculation of foreign policy success and failure. Put differently, those countries not militarily engaged in the region, including China and Brazil, have not yet experienced the lethal backlash of Middle East turbulence and the related jihadi backlash.

As indicated, much depends on whether the prevailing geopolitical outlook of dominant states in the West is the criterion of success or failure rather than the normative criteria of peace, human rights and justice in the region. I am far more inclined to rely on the latter evaluative approach as coupled with a revisionist interpretation of 21st Century geopolitics. I contend that given the realities of the contemporary world, a nonviolent geopolitics respectful of international law, the authority of the United Nations, and the primacy of the politics of self-determination, despite some difficulties, best serves the strategic interest of the United States (see Jens David Ohlin, The Assault on International Law, 2015). In effect, the United States position in the Middle East and the world would have been much more successful if built around adherence to international law and respect for UN authority than it has been by the refusal to accept the dynamics of self-determination. In this primary sense there is no conflict between affirming normative priorities and geopolitics, that is, presupposing reliance on this revisionist version of geopolitics.

This refusal to accept the political verdicts of self-determination remains in my view the unlearned major lesson of the American defeat in the Vietnam War, a lesson reinforced by the outcome of a series of wars against European colonial powers and by the unhappy post-Vietnam experiences of the United States with military intervention, most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. The only convincing reading of international history since the end of World War II is that military superiority does not produce political victories in struggles for national independence waged against foreign domination and generates a number of extra-geographical negative effects.
These results are unlike the experience of earlier centuries when military superiority did largely shape the historical process. It is quite understandable that this decline in the agency of military policy is hard to difficult to integrate into the thinking and behavior of Western elites.

After the Vietnam War, a conversation between an American colonel who was a counterinsurgency specialist and his Vietnamese counterpart makes this essential point. The American declares, “You know that you never defeated us on the battlefield,” to which the Vietnamese colonel replies, “Yes that is true, but it is irrelevant.” From my perspective, the failures of American foreign policy in the Middle East, and elsewhere, is largely a consequence of the inability and unwillingness to comprehend this irrelevance. General David Petraeus, rose to the top of the military bureaucracy by reinventing counterinsurgency warfare in the late 1980s as part of the effort to overcome what American policymakers were derisively calling “the Vietnam Syndrome,” that is, the post-Vietnam inhibition on the use of force due in the pursuit of international goals. I would argue that until the U.S. Government and its political leaders are ready to think outside this military box, we should expect more calls in the future for intervention, followed by new instances of frustration, failure, and non-territorial blowback. If you have watched the presidential debates there is no sign at all given by the candidates of either party of any understanding of the questionable role of military power in addressing characteristic 21st century conflicts. This understanding of the limited usefulness of military power has yet to penetrate the political consciousness of leaders and the public, and is rarely reflected in the media treatments of the Middle East. The consensus in Washington remains that it is military power that best correlates with American security and strategic interests in the Middle East and elsewhere. It had seemed for a while that the ex-colonial powers in Europe had learned this preeminently important lesson, and were successfully creating a culture of peace in Europe that included a reluctance to use force internationally except in self-defense as set forth in the UN Charter. Then the Libyan temptation came along in 2011, and spoiled this impression, which has now all but disappeared given the challenges posed for Europe by mass migration and ISIS.

Against this background, it seems helpful to depict the historical depth of the present circumstances together with a discussion of events that have shaped the challenge faced by American foreign policy in the region, and then reach for some partial explanations of what went wrong, followed by some thoughts as to what might be done by way of corrective. The distorting impact on American foreign policy of the two so-called special relationships that the United States maintains with Israel and Saudi Arabia deserves special attention. A critical attitude toward these special relationships is at the core of my revisionist approach to the regional turmoil and its extra-regional spillover. At the very point where grand strategists in the old realist tradition think American foreign policy has been most effective is where I think it has gone off the tracks if objectively appraised from the perspective of interests, policies, and values of the United States. In my view fixing these special relationships would initiate a long journey that will be needed if American foreign
policy in the Middle East is to more effective and more consistent with international norms and proclaimed American values.

III.

I am fully aware that there is something arbitrary and opinionated about any insistence that certain lines of historical explanation should be labeled “root causes.” My effort is to highlight some historically rather remote happenings that are not often enough mentioned when discussing policy options in the region. Also, as my focus is on the conceptual and normative failures of American foreign policy in the Middle East, I point to these early developments without any implication of a direct American responsibility, unlike the more recent proximate causes for which there exists a definite and direct American role. Indeed, here the responsibility that is asserted relates not to participation in misguided policies of past colonial actors but to the national failure of policymakers and leaders to make the effort to learn from the past.

**Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.** An initially secret agreement between Britain and France on how to divide up the Middle East in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The goal of the agreement was to extend European colonial rule to the region, thereby circumventing the self-determination aspirations of Woodrow Wilson and the United States as well as breaking promises to Arab leaders that assured sovereign independence. Russia had originally been party to this colonial diplomacy, but after the Russian Revolution, the agreement was made public by the new Soviet leadership with the intention of discrediting such diplomatic maneuvering.

What emerged were two developments that have significant relevance to the current turbulence and coercive ordering of the region: first, the establishment of artificial political communities with borders determined by colonial convenience rather than by historical and ethnic circumstances, completely neglecting the will of the relevant population or its prior experiences of community and culture. To give an example, Lebanon was carved out of Ottoman Syria to satisfy the French desire to have a Christian majority country in the region. In fact, all of the contemporary Middle Eastern territorial sovereign states were imposed from above and without, and lack indigenous legitimacy. Hence, when Osama Bin Laden, and more recently, ISIS, talk about the end of Sykes-Picot and the renewal of the Islamic caliphate, there is a cultural and historical resonance. The modern territorial sovereign state may seem like an inevitable choice given the character of world order and the persisting Orientalist mentality, but its legitimacy in the Middle East is fragile because the states failed to emerge as a consequence of the trials and errors of self-determination. From this perspective it is not so surprising that transnational non-state actors have emerged as the most formidable challengers of the established order in the Middle East, and nowhere else.
I encountered a similar non-territorial mindset when interviewing Ayatollah Khomeini in early 1979. On that occasion he made clear that the victory in Iran should not be grasped by reference to national or territorial parameters suggested by the label “the Iranian Revolution.” He insisted on the primacy of community as religious conceived, that is as an “Islamic Revolution.” In passing I would note that the state system is constitutive of world order, and that Iran as political actor has been challenged and responded since 1979 as a typical Westphalian state, especially given the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and the Israeli-American policy of aggressive containment of subsequent years.

Secondly, in such countries as Iraq, Libya, and Yemen the governance role of the state has been challenged from below. The idea of “the nation” so vital to the coherence and success of the modern European state was relatively weak in the Middle East, and never succeeded in displacing the primacy of tribal loyalties in many countries and regions within countries, eroding the capacity of the state to maintain order and control except by highly coercive methods. Further, in many states a particular tribal or kinship group would gain control of the state, and privilege their own group while discriminating against and persecuting rival tribes.

Thirdly, the inability after World War I to implement the Sykes-Picot vision of the Middle East leading to a kind of compromise in the form of the mandate system that combined colonial paternalism with a sacred trust given to the organized international community that these peoples subject to administrative rule by the European colonial powers would when “ready” be granted independence. In effect, this arrangement satisfied the substance of colonial ambition (trade routes, access to Suez Canal, resources) while ambiguously compromising its formal legitimacy. Without the weakening of Europe as a result of World War II, it is not clear that such independence would have been achieved, at least without lengthy wars of liberation of the sort fought in Indochina and North Africa.

**Balfour Declaration 1917.** Also initially secret, and equally colonialist, was the promise made by the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Alfred Balfour, to the World Zionist movement to look with favor on the establishment of a Jewish Homeland in Palestine. Such an initiative was an enormous morale boost for the fledgling Zionist project, and can be seen as a decisive negative turning point for the Palestinian people. It was a pure colonialist gesture, both the form of the declaration and the complete disregard of the wishes of the indigenous population. What Balfour proposed was written into the mandate arrangement for Palestine administered by Britain, which leaned toward the Zionist side at first because there was more of a convergence of interest than with the native Arab population. In the end, when Zionism became more robust, and aimed for the establishment of a Jewish state, it turned against the British, relying on terrorist tactics to induce the British to abandon the mandate, and give responsibility for the future of Palestine to the UN, which as we know, carried forward the colonialist approach by proposing a partition plan that was adopted without the participation or agreement of the people living in Palestine, two-thirds of whom at the time were Palestinian Arabs,
and about one-third Jews. Perhaps, the intentions underlying the UN proposal were benign, seeking some formula for peace and reconciliation, but the approach lacked the political will to implement the plan embodied in GA Resolution 181 and suffered from a process that was insensitive to the self-determination imperative.

Geopolitics also played a part in completing this Zionist project. The combination of the Holocaust and the guilty conscience of the liberal democracies led the international community to endow the state of Israel with immediate membership in the UN and left the Palestinian people in a permanent condition of limbo where they remain 68 years later. We hear frequent complaints from the U.S. Government and Israel that the UN pays disproportionate attention to Israel and Palestine, forgetting that unlike the other unresolved self-determination struggles in the world such as Kashmir, Western Sahara, Sri Lanka, the UN was from the outset directly implicated and responsible for the flawed approach to the post-Ottoman evolution of Palestine.

The Suez War of 1956. Without going into detail, the Suez War in which Britain, France, and Israel collaborated in waging war against Egypt in retaliation for the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the harassment of Israel by guerrilla fighters based in Egypt, had the major geopolitical impact of shifting the burden of protecting Western interests from Europe to the United States. At the time, it seemed like a benevolent sequel to the colonial era, but after the passage of 59 years it is not evident that this was helpful to the peoples of the region or for that matter to the United States. Put provocatively, the subsequent period might have had a different character if under the waning colonialism of a weak Europe rather than a strong and proactive United States (as complemented during the Cold War by a strong Soviet Union).

In conclusion, we cannot adequately grasp the depth of turmoil in the Middle East without looking back a century ago at the diplomacy associated with World War I. The denial of Kurdish rights, the questionable legitimacy of the borders of the countries in the region, and the frustration of Palestinian self-determination are persisting unresolved issues that offer insight into present challenges, and the difficulties of response. The region, and even the world, is paying the deferred costs of these policies in the form of chaos, oppression, severe civil strife, and terrorist blowback.

III

By moving from root causes to proximate causes the methodological claim is being made that the present regional turmoil was significantly generated by several seismic happenings in recent decades. Again these events singled out should be understood as shorthand designations of turning points that have had a lasting impact on the political life of the region, and are themselves a product of the earlier root causes. Because they occurred after the enhanced American engagement in the
Middle East after 1956 the United States was more of a participant, with more at stake.

The 1967 War. This war was a turning point in the strategic perception of Israel, changing its relationship to the United States rather dramatically from being a burden undertaken for moral and political reasons in defiance of realist calculations to becoming a strategic asset that could facilitate American hegemonic goals in the region. In this way the special relationship with Israel began to be perceived in terms of mutual benefits, and this was reinforced by the growth and influence of the Israel Lobby within the country. There is another more controversial view that the special relationship, at least as enacted, continued to distort American foreign policy, a position articulated by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in their book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007). It can be illustrated by the added complexities of the relationship with Iran and its nuclear program due to the need to insulate Israel’s nuclear weapons monopoly in the region; similarly diplomacy to end the Syrian War has been definitely inhibited by giving in to Israel (and Saudi Arabia) on the role of Iran in seeking a negotiated end to the war.

Perhaps, the biggest detrimental effect of the special relationship in relation to the greatly expanded territorial expanse of Israel after the 1967 War was the U.S. unwillingness to exert effective pressure on Israel to withdraw to the “green line” boundaries, which was the unanimously decreed directive of Security Council Resolution 242. I would imagine that if the withdrawal core of the resolution had been implemented, we would today have a two state solution rather than a single Israeli apartheid state that seems destined to sustain in one form or another its unilateral control over the whole of historic Palestine for the indefinite future. To give greater credence to this conjecture we should take into account both the 1988 PLO/PLC acceptance of the legitimacy of the Israeli presence within these 1967 green line borders on the basis of implementing 242 and the 2002 Arab Initiative along the same lines that offered Israel legitimacy and normalization. The United States has consistently affirmed this basis of Israel/Palestine peace, but it has been unwilling to use its geopolitical muscle to make it happen, and in fact has done the opposite, shielded Israel from criticism while the settlements expanded, and various steps were taken to make a viable Palestinian state incapable of realization. This double game of the United States that has bipartisan backing is to proclaim in public diplomacy its commitment to an independent Palestinian states and yet through the maneuverings of private diplomacy conspire with Israel’s increasingly evident resistance to the emergence of a Palestinian state.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-79). Without elaborating on this unexpected challenge to Western interests, the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran had a profoundly unsettling effect on American behavior in the region. First of all, it reversed the apparent success of the 1953 geopolitical move that had returned the Shah to his throne with the help of the CIA; secondly, it led to the shocked realization that political Islam was becoming a greater threat to American interests in the Middle East than either Marxism or Soviet encroachment;
thirdly, it introduced the notion of Islam as the natural political community in the Islamic world, with its ideas of a non-territorial caliphate and umma, which contrasted with the post-Ottoman imposition on the region of territorial sovereign states, which were not legitimate or natural even by Westphalian criteria.

The United States reacted hostilely to the popular movement that arose in Iran to displace its imperial ally in Tehran. Again, the root failure of American foreign policy was its unwillingness to respect the principle of self-determination if it seemed to go against its grand strategy in the region, which was then built around anti-Communism, oil, and Israel, soon supplemented by a strong commitment to oppose the spread of political Islam (unless serving Western interests as was the case with Saudi Arabia).

The Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989). The fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the collapse of the Soviet empire, contributed dramatically to upgrading the American role in the Middle East. It removed the Soviet Union as rival and left the United States as the uncontested external political actor in the region. It also had the effect, given salience by Israeli strategic thinking coupled with the rise of neo-conservative foreign policy in Washington, of shifting the central venue of geopolitical significance from Europe to the Middle East. What followed were years of supposed unipolarity in which the United States was being criticized in conservative circles for its passivity in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War in which a dramatic military victory was not followed up by imposing a regime-changing political solution that removed Saddam Hussein from control over the Baghdad government. Such a shift has been somewhat diluted during the Obama presidency by the so-called "pivot to Asia," but the persistence of chaos, warfare, and sectarian rivalries continues the preoccupation with the Middle East of American foreign policy.

IV

The Al Qaeda 9/11 Attacks. The fact that the Al Qaeda attacks in 2001 were carried out by Middle Easterners (manly Saudis) and that Al Qaeda, as led by Osama Bin Laden, took responsibility sharpened the perception that the main strategic threat to the United States now emanated from religious extremism in the Middle East as materialized through the medium of a non-state and non-territorial actor. Such a traumatic event has had lasting impacts by way of focusing attention on counter-terrorism and global securitization of foreign policy, categorizing terrorism as a mode of warfare rather than as crime as in the past, and transforming warfare from a territorial encounter to engage with on a global battlefield. It also led to a further positive perception of the special relationship with Israel as counterterrorist mentor. Ariel Sharon’s remark that Yasir Arafat was Israel’s Osama Bin Laden summarized this sentiment of solidarity, which Netanyahu repeated in crude form after the 2015 Paris attack. This mentorship I believe encouraged drone warfare,

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targeted assassinations, and even led to extensive reliance on Israel to train
American police forces in a paramilitary approach to opposition. President François
Hollande of France has taken the same path, calling the Paris terrorist attacks as “an
act of war” by ISIS, adopting the disastrous Bush discourse of warfare, rather than
elaborating upon the European counter-terrorist path of cooperative criminal law
enforcement.⁴

In light of the foregoing, what may seem more surprising is the resilience of the
special relationship with Saudi Arabia, given its connections with 9/11. Notable
Saudis were alone allowed to leave the United States on 9/12, and more relevantly,
the Saudi role in the worldwide financing of Wahabbist jihadism was publically
ignored by American leaders, and implicitly tolerated, which seems a perverse
contradiction with the securitization of American global policy based on a post-9/11
counterterrorist rationale. What seems shocking is that this tolerance persists even
in the face of the terrorist spillovers beyond the Middle East.

The Iraq War and Occupation. (2003-2014). The main response to 9/11 was George
W. Bush’s declaration of war on global terror, starting with the attack on
Afghanistan, governed by harsh Taliban rule and offering Al Qaeda its base area for
training and ideological leadership. In many ways this American shift from crime to
war is most responsible for the severity and spread of the regional turmoil. This
approach reached its climax with the attack on Iraq, which lacked a foundation in
international law, and could not gain an endorsement at the UN Security Council. In
this regard, the Iraq War of 2003, which was misleadingly principally justified by
efforts to remove weapons of mass destruction from the country and to react to the
false alleged complicity in the 9/11 attacks, was the occasion for bringing an
American military presence into the center of the Middle East, and connecting this
with safeguarding Israel and Saudi Arabia, confronting Iran, and establishing
permanent military bases and assured access to the oil and natural gas reserves of
the Gulf.

After a heavy expenditure of military personnel and resources, the outcome in Iraq
after a decade of occupation and economic reconstruction aid, has been dismal.
Instead of a partner with the West, there is a Shi’a leadership in Iraq that is pledged
to Iran, instead of constitutional democracy there is civil strife and chaos, instead of
security there is ISIS control over a large portion of Iraqi territory, instead of some
kind of regional collective security arrangement there is sectarian rivalry between
Iran and Saudi Arabia. Under such circumstances is it any surprise that the United
States policy planners dream of a second coming of Saddam Hussein? Once again
American failure was mainly associated with trying to impose an external solution
that defied the logic of self-determination.

The Arab Spring (2011). It is impossible to overlook the impact of the Arab uprisings
of 2011. What occurred was first an unexpected challenge from below to secular

autocracies throughout the region. It caught the United States by surprise, and alarmed to various degrees the two beneficiaries of special relationships—Israel and Saudi Arabia—although for somewhat different reasons. After calling for democratization in the Middle East for many years, the actuality of democratic glimmerings was greeted in Washington with ambivalence, at best, and more accurately, as an occasion of tension as between democratic values and geopolitical goals. This tension rose to the surface in the counterrevolutionary aftermath in which the United States sided with suppression in Bahrain, intervention in Libya, looked the other way when the Egyptian armed forces staged a bloody coup to overthrow the first ever democratically elected leader in the country’s history, and seemed bewildered by what to do in Syria, even seeming to give tacit tactical backing to jihadist anti-regime forces and to Kurdish militant entities previously regarded as “terrorist organizations.”

V

**Conclusion:** What should be done to calm the situation is in sharp tension with the realistic assessment of what is politically possible. For example, the special relationships with Israel and Saudi Arabia should be abandoned, and replaced by normal relationships based on true mutuality and respect for human rights and international law. Pressure should be mounted to establish a just and sustainable peace that acknowledges rights of self-determination of both Israeli and Palestinians. Further, foreign policy in the Middle East should be carried out in accord with the guidelines of international law and with respect for the authority of the United Nations. Finally, self-determination of peoples in the Middle East offers the only hope for legitimating the state system within the region. It seems obvious that without a sea change in perceptions and behavior of the West there is no prospect for overcoming the failures of American foreign policy in the Middle East. These failures have contributed to the turmoil, oppressiveness, and migratory and terrorist spillovers from the region. At present, there seems no likelihood of such a sea change, and so we must expect more of the same sense of failure and frustration. At least, the citizenry can begin to understand what is wrong with American foreign policy in the Middle East.