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Middle East

Middle East Imperial Meltdown

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From state meltdowns in Libya and Yemen to the overwhelming nightmares in Syria and Iraq, the spreading chaos in the Middle East today presents the most extreme examples of a core reality: imperial overreach creates problems for which it has no solutions, and the horrific human costs are paid by people who bear no responsibility for creating the mess. We'll briefly look here at some of the key situations in the Middle East, pointing to how a relentless U.S. drive for stability produces the opposite, in increasingly brutal consequences (some deliberate and some unintended) and how these crises feed back into the peculiarities of U.S. domestic political culture.

The rise of the grotesquely named "Islamic State" is the direct consequence of the Bush-era neoconservative delusion that U.S. power would transform the Middle East. In Syria, the destruction of society by both the formerly U.S.-allied Assad regime and ISIS, the genocidal massacres of minority religious and ethnic communities, the mass dislocation of refugees with nowhere to go or anywhere to return, and the loss of priceless cultural legacies, are largely irreparable.

"Islamic State" fighters

The imperialist scramble for political control and oil isn't new, of course. Indeed, for at least the past century it's been at the root of crises and tragedies in the Middle East, whether by direct invasion or by the installation and maintenance of dictatorships, manipulation of sectarian divisions, and sponsorship of settler-colonialism, especially in Palestine. [1] The Israeli state's drive to crush all Palestinian national aspirations, no matter how accommodating and moderate the Palestinian leadership becomes, will only accelerate with undiminished financing by the United States in the wake of the March 17 Israeli election, despite the blatant efforts by the Netanyahu regime to sabotage U.S. and European negotiations with Iran.

The tragic crushing of the revolutionary upheaval and brief democratic opening in Egypt is a huge setback for the people of that country and the entire region, and for the international left. The reconstruction of the presidentialist dictatorship under al-Sisi has produced a reality more brutal than the old Mubarak regime, precisely because the scale of the mass movement required more murderous repression. It's clear that the Egyptian military and deep state never intended to allow a democratic outcome, but despite hollow U.S. rhetoric about democracy and human rights, this counterrevolution was certainly preferable for Washington to the victorious spread of the Arab Spring.

The al-Sisi regime expects to be rewarded with a flood of international investment and it may well prove right if history is any guide. Capital poured into apartheid South Africa in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre (1960), into Chile after the 1973 coup, into South Korea after the Gwangju democratic uprising was crushed (1980), into China after the butchery at Tiananmen (1989), and plenty of other examples: why not into Egypt now?

Further, in labeling Hamas "terrorist," the restored Egyptian dictatorship is proving itself a loyal assistant in the Israeli-U.S. campaign to strangle Gaza. And with military aid from the United States fully restored, the Egyptian regime along with Saudi Arabia has launched a massive U.S.-supported military intervention into Yemen, including air strikes with no pretense of concern over enormous civilian casualties, quite possibly to be followed by a ground invasion. This campaign seems more than likely to lead to Yemen's disintegration, as well as a quagmire for the invaders. It's telling indeed that Pakistan, a longtime Saudi military ally, declined to

participate.

Yemen, only months ago, was announced by president Obama as a "Eurosoemodel of success" achieved with the help of U.S. drone strikes in the name of counter-terrorism. We now see how well that has worked out.

Sowing Catastrophe

The United States emerged from the 1991 Gulf War, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with a triumphal sense of overwhelming power and global mission. This was illusory, as the image of the "Eurosoeglobal hyperpower" could only be temporary. Most important, the defeats of Arab nationalism and the left would not lead to the neoliberal "Eurosoedemocratic transformation" of Washington's fantasies but to the growth of Islamist forces, reactionary and often murderous, with which imperialism has also been prepared to ally when it served some short-term purpose.

While the image of permanent U.S. supremacy inevitably had a shelf life, its decline was rapidly accelerated by ruinous policy choices, motivated in part by the ideologically-driven myth of "Eurosoethe new American century." The most egregious of these, the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, was a criminal enterprise, fraudulently motivated, arrogantly conceived, and stupidly implemented, with the most appalling consequences: for Iraq, where the direct death toll is estimated somewhere between 150,000 and half a million; for its neighbors; and for thousands of U.S. troops, some of whom returned home physically broken or as walking human time bombs.

Predictably, the regional beneficiary of the removal of one official U.S. enemy, Saddam Hussein, was another, the regime in Iran, whose influence has expanded ever since. The U.S. debacle in Iraq also generated domestic antiwar sentiment and popular anger, which (along with the 2007-08 financial meltdown, of course) greatly contributed to the election of president Barack Obama. Once in office, the Obama presidency faced the stark choice between sharply breaking from the George W. Bush war doctrine, or inheriting it. As on other issues (immigration, economic stimulus, health care, etc.) Obama attempted to "Eurosoesplit the difference" with results that have predictably become quagmires.

In attempting to extricate from Iraq, the U.S. relied upon the sectarian regime of Nouri al-Maliki until and even well after it had become obviously unsustainable, and has now returned U.S. troops in the guise of advisors. The promise to close Guantanamo prison camp stalled out "due in part to the president's unwillingness to confront the Republican right wing" resulting in a series of well-publicized outrages, a permanent well-deserved blot on the United States' international standing, and priceless recruitment propaganda for al-Qaeda and its ISIS offspring. Indeed, the rise of ISIS in all its naked and hideous barbarity is the ultimate expression of the "Clash of Barbarisms" that Marxist analyst Gilbert Achcar identified in his book following the 9-11 attacks. In the process, the Obama administration has essentially solidified as established practice what began as extralegal improvisations by the Bush-Cheney gang.

In Libya, U.S./NATO bombing became the air force of the anti-Qaddafi insurgency. The consequence was the toppling and assassination of Qaddafi, without the construction of a coherent political front or agreement among competing insurgent forces. The resulting fragmentation of power, internal hemorrhaging, and flow of weapons to ISIS and to regional Islamist armed groups in neighboring African states (including Mali and Nigeria) marks a tragic outcome of what began as such a promising popular Libyan uprising in the context of the Arab Spring.

Washington, Tel Aviv, and Tehran

Netanyahu and Obama

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The United States, Israel, and Iran are a special tangle. On one hand, in its actions toward Palestine and the Israeli state, the United States has performed the remarkable, perhaps unprecedented, trick of actively sabotaging its own stated policy. While calling repeatedly for a two-state solution, Washington has obstructed every initiative of the conservative and accommodationist Palestinian national leadership to move toward international recognition of statehood in some form. (Whether that goal itself is feasible, especially now that Israeli prime minister Netanyahu has dropped the pretense of supporting it, is a separate question.)

The Obama administration's record in the face of Israeli settlement expansion, violent aggression, and military intransigence has been a never-ending political and moral collapse. For this it has been rewarded with the open contempt of the Netanyahu government, and the amazing spectacle of 450+ members of the United States Congress jumping up and down in rapturous applause of a foreign leader openly ridiculing U.S. policy and the president.

The international left must defend and actively participate in the most powerful grassroots expression of solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right of self-determination: the growing BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) movement demanding the end of the Israeli occupation, dismantling of the structures of discrimination inside Israel, and establishing the Palestinian Right of Return. If anything, Netanyahu's reelection has brought a new groundswell of support for BDS on U.S. campuses. At a time when official political structures are utterly indifferent to Palestine, BDS is the best available tool for changing public understanding of the issue.

On the other hand, the linchpin of the Obama administration's attempt to salvage its Middle East strategy today must be a successful negotiation with Iran over nuclear development. It must attempt to accomplish this in the face of the Israeli and Republican drive, supported by many Democrats, for tighter sanctions and the ultimate insanity of another preemptive war. Iran, for its part, also needs an agreement to save its oil-dependent and sanctions-crippled economy from collapse. The act of the Republican Congressional leadership inviting Netanyahu to sabotage the negotiations was stunning, even by the present standards of U.S. politics of the long knives. The longstanding pretext in the United States that "foreign politics stop at the water's edge" has always been a lie, of course, but rarely has it been so transparently disregarded.

The preliminary framework agreement of the P5+1 (permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) with Iran required the Obama administration to work in partnership not only with European allies but also with Russia, even as tensions over Ukraine reach an explosive point. In order to complete this politically tangled and technically complex deal, Washington must treat Iran both as an official adversary and as a necessary partner in Iraq and in any hope of a solution in the Syrian catastrophe.

The Home Front

Not since the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-80 has a Middle East crisis been so entangled in U.S. domestic partisan politics. Now as then, the impact of these crises on U.S. political culture has been generally degrading. On the positive side, there is no war psychosis. Falling prices of oil and gasoline, to which Americans are acutely attuned with our lengthy commutes and automobile addictions, have taken the edge off the concept that we have to control our Middle East oil.

The U.S. public is properly cynical over the results of the Iraq war, and certainly hostile to new adventures, the ravings of revived neocons and Hillary Clinton's warlike rumblings notwithstanding. But the hideous acts of ISIS, spectacles of journalist beheadings, the Charlie Hebdo massacre, and rumors of terrorist plotting have certainly enhanced the ambient level of Islamophobia—although clearly not nearly to the levels visible in some European countries. What does uniquely exist in the United States is a high level of Christian fundamentalism, which views events in the Middle East through the lens of Biblical end-time prophecy and exerts a powerful distorting influence on political debate, especially in the Republican party.

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In short, the fading Obama presidency has been drawnâ€”and has dragged the countryâ€”into quagmires from which it had promised to escape. The Obama legacy will include the militarization of the U.S. border and urban police forces (greatly assisted by Israeli expertise in these methods), institutionalized legitimacy of drone warfare and assassinations, massive security oversight of the population, and permanent states of war, much of them half-hidden, from Pakistan to North Africa. The presidency that was supposed to clean up the mess that George W. Bush made has mostly served to confirm what the left has known but is sometimes tempted to forget: there is hardly any situation so appalling, so destructive, so catastrophic in human and political terms that â€œour ownâ€ imperialist government canâ€t find a way to make it worse.

April 23, 2015

This editorial will appear in the May-June 2015 issue of Against the Current.

[1] *Against the Current* [From Sykes-Picot to "Islamic State": Imperialism's Bloody Wreckage](#) .