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Middle East

Empire and the Middle East in the age of Trump

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Donald Trump's announcement that the U.S. would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy there has caused an eruption of protest across the Middle East and beyond. But Washington's influence and power in the region has been declining for some time due to a series of setbacks.

Gilbert Achcar is a socialist who grew up in Lebanon and the author of numerous books, including *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* and *Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder*. He talked to Alan Maass about recent developments in the Middle East and the consequences after a year of Trump.

The U.S. has been mainly focused on defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which seems to have been largely accomplished with offensives to drive ISIS out of its main strongholds in both countries. First question: What happens to the Islamic State now?

ISIS has obviously suffered a severe defeat. They thought they had built a state, a caliphate that would last for a long time on a very large stretch of territory in Syria and Iraq, and they have basically lost all this. It lasted some three years before unraveling.

You could say that it was already a feat for ISIS to hold onto such a large territory for such a long time against virtually everybody else. Because this is the only group against which there has been some kind of unanimity among all other forces involved in the region.

ISIS has suffered a heavy defeat, but that doesn't mean it will disappear. A lot of its fighters managed to go underground in Iraq and Syria, and they have branches in several other countries. And as we see from the case of al-Qaeda, terrorism can carry on over the long haul through underground networks.

I'm sure we will see a lot of this terrorism in the coming periodâ€”because there's no real way to get rid of such a scourge without changing the conditions that produce it.

Today, these conditions are quite complicated. They include, first of all, state terrorism, starting with Israel's and that perpetrated by Western imperialist domination in the region. A lot of what has happened worldwide since 1990 finds its roots in the wars waged by the U.S. against Iraq in 1991 and 2003, and [the ensuing occupation of Iraq](#).

But there are also many despotic regimes in the region that practice state terrorism and stoke similar hatred, thus creating a breeding ground for groups like ISIS.

Overall, we are witnessing what I called in a book I wrote after 9/11 [the "clash of barbarisms."](#) The barbarism of the strong creates conditions for a counter-barbarism of the weak.

That's what we have been seeingâ€”and we'll see more of it, I'm afraid to sayâ€”whether the strong barbarism is the United States of America, the deadliest of all, or Russia, or local despotic regimes such as the Assad tyranny in Syria, the most barbaric of the regional governments, or the Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, to name but two.

The other side of the question stemming from the conquest of ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria is where

this leaves U.S. imperialism. What's the position of the U.S. relative to the regional powers in the Middle East and to its international imperialist rivals?

There's no doubt that the United States is at the lowest point of its influence in the region since 1990. That's when the U.S. intervened, deploying massive forces to the region in the preamble to the first war against Iraq. The U.S. reached a peak in the history of its regional hegemony after that.

This happened at a time when the Soviet Union was in its death throes, and so Washington took complete control of the situation in the Middle East. When you measure the present situation compared to that peak, you see how much the U.S. has fallen.

The clearest illustration was the uprisings of 2011. That was the year when the U.S. had to withdraw from Iraq without achieving any of the occupation's goals, leaving a country that had fallen under the control of Washington's regional archenemy, Iran. Tehran now has much more decisive influence over the Iraqi government than Washington.

2011 was also the year when key allies of Washington faced mass uprisings. There was Hosni Mubarak in Egypt after the Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi, who had shifted to Washington's side in 2003, followed them, and Bahrain erupted in a rebellion, scaring all the Gulf oil monarchies.

The military intervention in Libya in support of the uprising against Qaddafi was the occasion for Obama's famous formula about "leading from behind," reflecting the fact that the U.S. had a lower profile in that intervention than its European allies in NATO, which took the lead.

But that intervention turned into a fiasco. The attempt at controlling the Libyan insurgency and steering it toward a conclusion that would preserve the Libyan state failed miserably, and the Libyan state collapsed entirely.

Libya thus became the only Arab country where the revolution had succeeded in thoroughly overthrowing the ruling regime—except that there was no alternative in place, let alone a progressive one. Chaos ensued naturally.

The "Yemen solution"—a compromise between that country's ruling group and the opposition concocted by the Gulf oil monarchies with U.S. support, and so much praised by Obama that he pointed to it as the model to be applied in Syria—collapsed tragically after less than three years.

So the U.S. has accumulated a whole series of setbacks in the region since the invasion of Iraq. The Iraq war will be [remembered in the history of the U.S. empire as a major misstep](#)—a self-defeating occupation undertaken by the Bush administration against the advice of even close friends of the Bush family who knew what kind of problems the U.S. would face.

As a result, Washington is at a very low point compared to a few decades ago. It seized the opportunity of ISIS's expansion into Iraq in 2014 to orchestrate a limited comeback. It organized a coalition to launch a bombing campaign against ISIS, established some presence again in Iraq, and did the same in Syria.

Washington's main intervention on the ground in Syria was on the side of the Kurdish forces. That in itself is a paradox, because these forces stem from a radical left tradition—yet they were the main ally of the U.S. in the fight against ISIS in Syria. Donald Trump has called this "ridiculous," declaring he wants to stop it.

Again, this shows Washington's general weakness—whereas Iran is expanding its power, influence and direct intervention in the region. And Russia, of course, appears as a big winner in this whole situation, from Syria to Libya.

Moscow started [intervening directly in Syria with its air force in 2015](#). At the time, the Obama administration welcomed Russia's intervention under the pretext that Russia would be participating in the war against ISIS. But everybody knew that Moscow's main target was going to be the Syrian opposition to the Assad regime, not ISIS.

Essentially, Washington gave Russia a free hand to help the Syrian regime crush its opposition. After Trump's election, but before he became president, Russia began to prepare itself for the role of solution-maker in Syria, suddenly acting the role of arbiter between the regime and the opposition, with both Iran and Turkey on board.

There is one more issue here. In the autumn of 2016, Turkey, angered by Washington's support for the Kurdish forces in Syria, shifted into an alliance with Russia, thus dealing another heavy blow to U.S. influence in the region.

Today, Russia appears to be the country that is gaining ground in the whole region, while the U.S. is losing ground. Moscow appears today as the most effective buttress of the regional repressive order. After the very brutal role it played in Syria, it was granted air base facilities in Egypt by Sisi to sustain Sisi's intervention in Libya along with the United Arab Emirates, in support of the local strongman Khalifa Haftar. All the oil monarchies, including the Saudis, are courting Moscow and buying Russian weaponry.

Donald Trump is definitely not going to reverse this tide of U.S. regional decline. On the contrary, he is the reason for a further, rapid deterioration of U.S. influence in the Middle East.

And now Trump has made the announcement that the U.S. will recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. What impact will that have?

This is a completely gratuitous provocation that only an irrational man like Trump could carry out—irrational, that is, by the standard of the basic interests of U.S. imperialism.

It definitely doesn't serve U.S. interests to play such a game. Trump is doing it for no apparent reason but to cater to the most reactionary wing of his supporters and boost his morbid narcissism of having "delivered" where his predecessors failed to fulfil their campaign pledges.

He's done it without offering anything to try to appease the Palestinians. He hasn't secured anything from the Netanyahu government in Israel in return for making such a move. It just doesn't make sense from the point of view of U.S. Middle East politics.

This will cost Washington a lot, at a time when its image, because of Trump, is already terribly negative in the Arab world, the Muslim world and the Global South. [Whatever limited image enhancement was achieved under Obama](#) has been completely wiped out and replaced with the ugliest image the U.S. has ever had in the world.

The result can only be more hatred against the U.S., breeding more terrorism—the weapon of the weak. And once more, the U.S. population will bear the price of its rulers' rapacity, just as it did with 9/11, which was a direct result of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Let me ask about another part of the picture: Can you talk about the developments in Saudi Arabia with

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's maneuvers?

What's happening in the Saudi kingdom is, first of all, a domestic matter—it's a struggle for power. What has been happening is a kind of "palace revolution," but in relatively slow motion in the sense that it has been done by stages, until the recent dramatic arrest of several tycoons among the emirs and other members of the country's aristocracy.

We are witnessing an attempt by Mohammad bin Salman [often referred to by his initials MBS] to turn the kingdom into more of the traditional pattern of monarchies, where you have one smaller family ruling. In the Saudi kingdom, by contrast, there is an extended ruling family made up of the sons of Abdulaziz (Ibn Saud), a king who had a huge number of them—45 sons among close to 100 children—because of the number of wives he has had: over 20!

MBS is attempting to end this tradition of rule by the extended Saudi family and concentrate power in his own hands, inaugurating a new dynastic line. He's doing this from the position of crown prince, since his father is the king, but his father is supporting everything he's doing, so he has carte blanche in that regard.

He is an ambitious young man who was appointed Minister of Defense in January 2015 after his father Salman became king, when he wasn't yet 30.

The first thing he did as Minister of Defense was to launch the war on Yemen—a [devastating, murderous bombing campaign](#) by the Saudis and their allies. It has failed in the sense that the expectation that the Saudis and the coalition would settle the matter quickly proved completely wrong.

As you can see from recent events—especially the killing of former President Ali Abdallah Saleh after he turned coat one more time and announced a renewed alliance with the Saudis—they are very far from achieving victory. They only succeeded in causing what is already the worst humanitarian tragedy of our time, with close to 7 million people facing death from starvation and close to 1 million facing death from cholera.

MBS then shifted his attention to more domestic affairs, and that was when the previous crown prince, who had been designated according to the old tradition, was simply removed from that position, and MBS took his place. This was a key moment in the "palace revolution"—the first major break with tradition.

Since then, MBS has been consolidating his own power by eliminating potential rivals. Anyone who could stand in his way is being repressed, arrested and harassed under various pretexts, one of them being corruption.

Of course, MBS resorted to this pretext because it is popular, and it is undeniable that there is a huge lot that is rotten in the Saudi state. But it's also obvious that this is just a pretext.

MBS is himself very corrupt indeed—it's a young man who can use any amount of money any way he wants, while imposing austerity on his kingdom's subjects. He proved that last year when he fancied a yacht belonging to a Russian tycoon and bought it for half a billion euros—around \$550 million! That just gives you an idea of who we're dealing with.

What are the reverberations of this power struggle for the region? For example, the Saudi regime seems to have attempted to intervene in Lebanon by getting its chief local ally Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign. All of these moves are bound up with its longtime rivalry with Iran, right?

The Saudi kingdom has been increasingly worried by Iranian expansionism—first in Iraq, then in Syria, and through to Lebanon. There is now a corridor of Iranian domination running from Tehran to Beirut, which includes both direct and proxy Iranian military presence.

The Saudis are extremely worried about this because they see Iran as their archenemy. They have ever since the Islamic revolution in Iran, which overthrew the monarchy there in 1979—a nightmare scenario for the Saudis, who were confronted the same year with an ultra-fundamentalist uprising at home in Mecca.

When Salman became king in 2015, he first shifted the Saudi kingdom toward a policy of unifying Sunni forces in the region. He followed this policy for a couple of years, including mending fences to a certain degree with the Muslim Brotherhood.

That continued until Donald Trump became president. Trump, advised by the sinister Stephen Bannon, pushed for a reversal of this policy and an escalation against both Iran on the one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other.

This led earlier this year to [Saudi Arabia's break with Qatar](#), which is the main sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood. Until that point, Qatar was involved in the coalition bombing of Yemen, but it was kicked out of that coalition because of this issue. That was a very poor maneuver, and it backfired.

The escalation against Iran is what led to the recent episode with Lebanon. Hariri is entirely dependent on the Saudis. The Hariri family made its fortune in the Saudi kingdom, through its connection with members of the ruling family, which is a prerequisite of all moneymaking in the kingdom.

The message that was being sent by the Saudis is that we don't want our people—that is, Hariri—participating in a government in Lebanon that is dominated by Iran's people, which is Hezbollah.

That was the message. But even that failed due to the intervention of Western governments, including the U.S. and France. The French president Macron played an active role in getting Hariri out of the kingdom and back to Lebanon, where he is now engaged anew in some form of compromise, which is what the Saudis wanted to end. The situation there is highly unstable, though.

Can you draw some general conclusions about the balance sheet of revolution and counterrevolution now, almost seven years after the Arab Spring? You've written before about understanding this as an ongoing process—not broken up into separate episodes, but continuous. Could you expand on that?

The starting point is to understand that [what was called the Arab Spring](#) wasn't limited to issues of democracy and freedom, as it was portrayed in the media. It was a much deeper social and economic explosion, due to the accumulation of grievances of a social character. Record rates of unemployment, especially for youth; low standards of living; poverty—it all came to a head in 2011.

That's why I emphasized at the time that what I called a "long-term revolutionary process" had started, one that would carry on for many, many years of turmoil—one can say confidently now: decades.

There will be no new stabilization in this part of the world for a very long time indeed because the condition for stabilization is a radical social and political change, one that would put the region on track for a very different kind of economic and social development. Without such radical change, the instability of the Middle East won't be resolved.

The immediate problem of the moment is that the progressive forces that emerged in the Arab Spring have receded to the margin almost everywhere within several years of 2011. Since then, the region has been torn between two reactionary forces.

On the one hand, there are the regimes—or their remnants in countries where they were overthrown or significantly undermined. And on the other, there are the Islamic fundamentalist forces—most importantly, the Qatar-sponsored Muslim Brothers and Saudi-inspired Salafists—that have arisen since the 1970s and '80s on the corpse of a previous wave of left-wing activity, in which nationalist and communist parties played a key role.

The reality is that the whole region has shifted since 2013 from the preceding revolutionary phase, dubbed the Arab Spring, to a counterrevolutionary phase. The latter is characterized by the clash between the two counterrevolutionary poles—that of the regimes and that of [their Islamic fundamentalist rivals](#).

This is what is at work in the wars that have erupted in Libya, Syria and Yemen—basically, you find those same ingredients everywhere. They exist in the intensifying situation in Egypt: the form they took there was the return of the old regime with a vengeance, crushing the Muslim Brotherhood.

We are in the midst of this counterrevolutionary phase. But at the same time, you can see from any number of indications that social issues are boiling over. Not only are all the social and economic factors that led to the explosion in 2011 still there, but they are a great deal worse.

This will lead to further explosions and further turmoil: that much is sure. We can only hope that the progressive potential that emerged powerfully in 2011 will be able to reconstitute and organize itself to bid for power. This is what was lacking in the Arab Spring—organizations that embody this potential, with a clear strategy of building an alternative to both the old regimes and their fundamentalist contenders.

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