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Slouching Toward Global Disaster

By Richard Falk
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There are many disturbing signs that the West is creating conditions in the Middle East and Asia that could produce a wider war, most likely a new Cold War, containing, as well, menacing risks of World War III. The reckless confrontation with Russia along its borders, reinforced by provocative weapons deployments in several NATO countries and the promotion of governing regimes hostile to Russia in such countries as Ukraine and Georgia seems to exhibit Cold War nostalgia, and is certainly not the way to preserve peace.

Add to this the increasingly belligerent approach recently taken by the United States naval officers and defense officials to China with respect to island disputes and navigational rights in the South China Seas. Such posturing has all the ingredients needed for intensifying international conflict, giving a militarist signature to Obama's 'pivot to Asia.'

These developments are happening during the supposedly conflict averse Obama presidency. Looking ahead to new leadership, even the most optimistic scenario that brings Hillary Clinton to the White House is sure to make these pre-war drum beats even louder.

From a more detached perspective it is fair to observe that Obama seems rather peace-oriented only because American political leaders and the Beltway/media mainstream have become so accustomed to relying on military solutions whether successful or not, whether dangerous and wasteful or not, that is, only by comparison with more hawkish alternatives.

The current paranoid political atmosphere in the United States is a further relevant concern, calling for police state governmental authority at home, increased weapons budgets, and the continuing militarization of policing and law enforcement.

Such moves encourage an even more militaristic approach to foreign challenges that seem aimed at American and Israeli interests by ISIS, Iran, and China. Where this kind of war-mongering will lead is unknowable, but what is frighteningly clear is that this dangerous geopolitical bravado is likely to become even more strident as the 2016 campaign unfolds to choose the next American president.

Already Donald Trump, the clear Republican frontrunner, has seemed to commit the United States to a struggle against all of Islam by his foolish effort to insist that every Muslim is a terrorist suspect Islam as a potential terrorist who should be so treated. Even Samuel Huntington were he still alive might not welcome such an advocate of 'the clash of civilizations'!

Historical Deep Roots

It has taken almost a century for the breakup of the Ottoman Empire to reap the colonialist harvest that was sown in the peace diplomacy that followed World War I. In the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement diplomats of England and France in 1916 secretly negotiated arrangements that would divide up the Middle East into a series of artificially delimited territorial states to be administered as colonies by the respective European governments.

Among other wrongs, this devious undertaking representing a betrayal of promises made to Arab leaders that Britain, in particular, would support true independence in exchange for joining the anti-Ottoman and anti-German alliance formed to fight World War I. Such a division of the Ottoman spoils not only betrayed wartime promises of political independence to Arab leaders, but also undermined the efforts of Woodrow Wilson to apply the principle of ethnic self-determination to the Ottoman aftermath.

As a result of diplomatic maneuvers the compromise reached at Versailles in 1919 was to accept the Sykes-Picot borders that were drawn to satisfy colonial ambitions for trade routes and

spheres of influence, but to disguise slightly its colonialist character, by creating an international system of mandates for the Middle East in which London and Paris would administer the territories, accepting a vague commitment to lead the various societies to eventual political independence at some unspecified future time. These Sykes-Picot 'states' were artificial political communities that never overcame the indigenous primacy of ethnic, tribal, and religious affinities, and could be maintained as coherent political realities only by creating oppressive state structures. If World War II had not sapped European colonial will and capabilities, it is easy to imagine that the societies of the Middle East would remain subjugated under mandate banners.

After World War II

Is it any wonder, then, that the region has been extremely beset by various forms of authoritarian rule ever since the countries of the Middle East gained their independence after the end of the Second World War?

Whether in the form of dynastic monarchies or secular governments, the stability that was achieved in the region depended on the denial of human rights, including rights of democratic participation, as well as the buildup of small privileged and exploitative elites that linked national markets and resources to the global economic order. And as oil became the prime strategic resource, the dominance of the region became for the West led by the United States as absolutely vital.

From these perspectives the stable authoritarianism of the region was quite congenial with the Cold War standoff between the United States and Soviet Union that was interested in securing strategic and economic partnerships reflecting the ideological rivalries, while being indifferent to whether or not the people were being victimized by abusive and brutal governments.

The American commitment to this status quo in the Middle East was most vividly expressed in 1980 after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution of the prior year by the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine.

President Carter in his State of the Union Address was warning the Soviet Union by a strong diplomatic signal that the United States was ready to defend its interests in the Persian Gulf by force, which because of supposed Soviet superiority in ground warfare was understood at the time as making an implied threat to use nuclear weapons if necessary.

After the Cold War

When the Cold War ended, the United States unthinkingly promoted the spread of capitalist style constitutional democracy wherever it could, including the Middle East. The Clinton presidency (1992-2000) talked about the 'enlargement' of the community of democratic states, implying that any other political option lacked legitimacy (unless of course it was a friendly oil producer or strategic ally).

The neocon presidency of George W. Bush (2000-2008) with its interventionist bent invoked 'democracy promotion' as its goal, and became clear in its official formulation of security

doctrine in 2002 that only capitalist democracies were legitimate Westphalian states whose sovereign rights were entitled to respect.

This kind of strident militarism reached a new climax after 9/11.

The White House apparently hoped to embark on a series regime-changing interventions in the Middle East and Asia with the expectation of producing at minimal cost shining examples of liberation and democratization, as well as secure the Gulf oil reserves and establish military bases to undergird its regional ambitions.

The attacks on Afghanistan, and especially Iraq, were the most notorious applications of this misguided approach. Instead of 'democracy' (Washington's code word for integration into its version of neoliberal globalization), what emerged was strife and chaos, and the collapse of stable internal governance. The strong state that preceded the intervention gave way to localized militias and resurgent tribal, clan, and religious rivalries leading domestic populations to wish for a return to the relative stability of the preceding authoritarian arrangements, despite their brutality and corruption.

And even in Washington one encounters whispered admissions that Iraq was better off, after all, under Saddam Hussein than under the kind of sectarian and divisive leaders that governed the country since the American occupation began in 2003, and now threaten Iraq with an implosion that will produce at least two states replacing the shattered one.

The Arab Spring

Then came the Arab Spring in 2011 creating an awkward tension between the professed wish in Washington for democracy in the Arab world and the overriding commitment to upholding strategic interests throughout the Middle East. At first, the West reacted ambivalently to the Arab uprisings, not knowing whether to welcome, and then try to tame, these anti-authoritarian movements of the Arab masses or to lament the risks of new elites that were likely to turn away from neoliberal capitalism and strategic partnerships, and worst of all, might be more inclined to challenge Israel.

What happened in the years that followed removed the ambiguity, confirming that material and ideological interests took precedence over visionary endorsements of Arab democracy.

The reality that emerged indicated that neither the domestic setting nor the international context was compatible with the existence of democratic forms of governance. What unsurprisingly followed was a series of further military interventions and strategic confrontations either via NATO as in Libya or by way of its regional partners, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as in Iran, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen.

With few tears shed in Washington, the authentic and promising democratic beginnings in Egypt that excited the world in the aftermath of the 2011 Tahrir Square were crushed two years later by a populist military coup that restored Mubarak Era authoritarianism, accentuating its worst features.

What amounted to the revenge of the urban secular elites in Cairo included a genuine bonding between a new majority of the Egyptian people and its armed forces in a bloody struggle to challenge and destroy the Muslim Brotherhood that had taken control of the government by winning a series of elections.

Despite its supposed liberalism the Obama leadership played along with these developments. It obliged the new Sisi-led leadership by avoiding the term ‘coup’ although the military takeover was followed by a bloody crackdown on the elected leadership and civil society leadership.

This Orwellian trope of refusing to call a coup by its real name enabled the United States to continue military assistance to Egypt without requiring a new Congressional authorization.

The folk wisdom of the Arab world gives insight into the counterrevolutionary backlash that has crushed the populist hopes of 2011: “People prefer 100 years of tyranny to a single year of chaos.”

And this kind of priority is shared by most of those who make and manage American foreign policy. Just as clearly as the Arab masses, the Pentagon planners prefer the stability of authoritarianism to the anarchistic uncertainties of ethnic and tribal strife, militia forms of governance that so often come in the wake of the collapse of both dictatorial rule and democratic governance.

And the masters of business and finance, aside from the lure of post-conflict markets for the reconstruction of what has been destroyed militarily, prefer to work with dependable and familiar national elites that welcome foreign capital on lucrative terms that benefit insiders and outsiders alike, while keeping the masses in conditions of impoverished thralldom.

In many respects, Syria and Iraq illustrate the terrible human tragedies that have been visited on the peoples of these two countries. In Syria a popular uprising in 2011 was unforgivably crushed by the Bashar el-Assad regime in Damascus, leading to a series of disastrous interventions on both sides of the internal war that erupted, with Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in a proxy war on Syrian soil while Israel uses its diplomatic leverage to ensure that the unresolved war would last as long as possible as Tel Aviv wanted neither the regime nor its opponents to win a clear victory.

During this strife, Russia, Turkey, and the United States were intervening with a bewildering blend of common and contradictory goals ranging from pro-government stabilization to a variety of regime changing scenarios. These external actors held conflicting views of the Kurdish fighters as either coveted allies or dangerous adversaries.

In the process several hundred thousand Syrians have lost their lives, almost half the population have become refugees and internally displaced persons, much of the country and its ancient heritage sites devastated, and no real end of the violence and devastation is in sight.

The Iraq experience is only marginally better.

After a dozen years of punitive sanctions following the 1991 ceasefire that exacted a heavy toll on the civilian population, the ‘shock and awe’ of US/UK attacks of 2003, an occupation began that rid the country of its cruel and oppressive leader, Saddam Hussein, and his entourage.

What followed politically became over time deeply disillusioning, and actually worse than the overthrown regime, which had been hardly imaginable when the American-led occupation began. The Iraqi state was being reconstructed along sectarian lines, purging the Sunni minority elites from the Baghdad bureaucracy and armed forces, thereby generating a widespread internal violent opposition against foreign occupation and a resistance movement against the Iraqi leadership that had gained power with the help of the American presence.

This combination of insurgency and resistance also gave rise to widespread feelings of humiliation and alienation, which proved to be conducive to the rise of jihadi extremism, first in the form of al-Qaeda in Iraq and later as ISIS.

Toxic Geopolitics

It is impossible to understand and explain such a disastrous failure of military interventionism without considering the effects of two toxic ‘special relationships’ formed by the United States, with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The basic feature of such special relationships is an unconditional partnership in which the Israelis and Saudis can do whatever they wish, including pursuing policies antagonistic to U.S. interests without encountering any meaningful opposition from either Washington or Europe.

This zone of discretion has allowed Israel to keep Palestinians from achieving self-determination while pursuing its own territorial ambitions via constantly expanding settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, fueling grassroots anti-Western sentiment throughout the Arab world because of this persisting reliance on a cruel settler colonialist approach to block for seven decades the Palestinian struggle for fundamental and minimal national rights.

The special relationship with Saudi Arabia is even more astonishing until one considers the primacy of economic strategic priorities, especially the importance of oil supplied at affordable prices. Having by far the worst human rights record in the region, replete with judicially decreed beheadings and executions by stoning, the Riyadh leadership continues to be warmly courted in Western capitals as allies and friends. At the same time, equally theocratic Iran is hypocritically bashed and internationally punished in retaliation for its far less oppressive governing abuses.

Of course, looking the other way, is what is to be expected in the cynical conduct of opportunistic geopolitics, but to indulge the Saudi role in the worldwide promotion of jihadism while spending trillion on counter-terrorism is much more difficult to fathom until one shifts attention from the cover story of counter-terrorism to the more illuminating narrative of petropolitics. Despite fracking and natural gas discoveries lessening Western dependence on Middle Eastern oil, old capitalist habits persist long after their economic justifications have lapsed and this seems true even when such policies have become damaging in lives and financial burdens.

Finding Hope is Difficult

In such circumstances, it is difficult to find much hope in the current cosmodrama of world politics.

It is possible, although unlikely, that geopolitical sanity will prevail to the extent of finding a diplomatic formula to end the violence in Syria and Yemen, as well as to normalize relations with Iran, restore order in Iraq and Libya, although such sensible outcomes face many obstacles, and may be years away.

The alternatives for the Middle East in the near future, barring the political miracle of a much more revolutionary and emancipatory second Arab Spring, seems to be authoritarian stability or anarchic strife and chaos, which seems far preferable if the alternative is the deep trauma associated with enduring further American military interventions.

If you happen to hear the Republican candidates give their prescriptions for fixing the Middle East it comes down to 'toughness,' including the scary recommendations of 'carpet bombing' and a greatly heightened American military presence.

Even the more thoughtful Democrats limit their proposals to enhanced militarism, hoping to induce the Arab countries to put 'the boots on the ground' with nary a worry about either igniting a regional war or the imaginative collapse that can only contemplate war as the recipe for peace, again recalling the degree to which Orwellian satiric irony is relied upon to shape foreign policy prescriptions by ambitious politicians.

Imaginative diplomacy, talking and listening to the enemy, and engaging in self-scrutiny remains outside the cast iron cage of the military mentality that has long dominated most of the political space in American foreign policy debates with the conspicuous help of the passive aggressive mainstream media.

In this respect, American democracy is a broken reality, and conscientious citizens must look elsewhere as a prison break of the political imagination is long overdue.