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New US reality: An empire beyond salvation

By Ramzy Baroud

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US Secretary of State John Kerry couldn't hide his frustration anymore as the US-sponsored Palestinian peace process continued to falter. After eight months of wrangling to push talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority forward, he admitted while on a visit to Morocco on April 4 that the latest setback had served as a "reality check" for the peace process. But confining that reality check to the peace process is hardly representative of the painful reality through which the United States has been forced to subsist in during the last few years.

The state of US foreign policy in the Middle East, but also around the world, cannot be described with any buoyant language. In some instances, as in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Ukraine, and most recently in Palestine and Israel, too many calamitous scenarios have exposed the fault lines of US foreign policy. The succession of crises is not allowing the US to cut its losses in the Middle East and stage a calculated "pivot" to Asia following its disastrous Iraq war.

US foreign policy is almost entirely crippled. For the Obama administration, it has been a continuous firefighting mission since George W Bush left office. In fact, there have been too many "reality checks" to count.

According to the logic of the once powerful pro-Israel Washington-based neoconservatives, the invasion of Iraq was a belated attempt at regaining the initiative in the Middle East and controlling a greater share of the energy supplies worldwide.

Sure, the US media made much noise about fighting terror, restoring democracies and heralding freedoms, but the neo-cons were hardly secretive about the real objectives. They tirelessly warned about the decline of their country's fortunes. They labored to redraw the map of the Middle East in a way that they imagined would slow down the rise of China and the other giants that are slowly but surely standing on their feet to face up to the post-Cold War superpower.

All such efforts were bound to fail. The US escaped from Iraq, but only after altering the balance of power and creating new classes of winners and losers. The violence of the invasion and occupation scarred Iraq, and also destabilized neighboring countries by overwhelming their economies, augmenting militancy and creating more pressure cookers in political spaces that were, until then, somewhat stable.

The war left the US fatigued and set the course for a transition in the Middle East, although not the kind of transition that the likes of former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice had championed. There was no "New Middle East" per se, but rather an old one that is in much worse shape than ever before.

When the last US soldier scheduled to leave Iraq had crossed the border into Kuwait in December 2011, the US was exposed in more ways than one. The limits of US military power was revealed - by not winning, it had lost. Its economy proved fragile - as it continues to teeter between collapse and "recovery". It was left with zero confidence among its friends. As for its enemies, the US was no longer a daunting menace but a toothless tiger.

There was a short period in US foreign policy strategy in which Washington needed to count its losses, regroup and regain initiative, but not in the Middle East. The Asia Pacific region, especially the South China Sea, seemed to be the most rational restarting point, and for a good reason.

Writing in Forbes magazine in Washington, Robert D Kaplan described the convergence underway in the Asia Pacific region. He wrote, "Russia is increasingly shifting its focus of energy exports to East Asia. China is on track to perhaps become Russia's biggest export market for oil before the end of the decade."

The Middle East is itself changing directions, as the region's hydrocarbon production is increasingly being exported there; Russia is covering the East Asia realm, according to Kaplan, as "North America will soon be looking more and more to the Indo-Pacific region to export its own energy, especially natural gas."

But the US is still being pulled into too many different directions. It has attempted to police the world exclusively for its own interests for the past 25 years. It has failed. "Cut and run" is essentially an American foreign policy staple, and that too is a botched approach. Even after the piecemeal US withdrawal from Iraq, the US is too deeply entrenched in the Middle East region to achieve a clean break.

The US took part in the Libya war, attempting to do so while masking its action as part of a

larger drive by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization so that it shouldered only part of the blame when things went awry, as they predictably have. Since the January 25 revolution, its position on Egypt was perhaps the most inconsistent of all Western powers, unmistakably demonstrating its lack of clarity and relevance to a country with a massive size and influence.

However, it was in Syria that US weaknesses were truly exposed. Military intervention was not possible - and for reasons none of which were moralistic. Its political influence proved immaterial. Most importantly, its own legions of allies throughout the Middle East are walking away from beneath the US leadership banner. The new destinations are Russia for arms and China for economic alternatives.

President Barack Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia in late March might have been a step too little too late to repair America's weakening alliances in the region. Even if the US was ready to mend fences, it has neither the political will, the economic potency, nor the military prowess to be effective. True, the US still possesses massive military capabilities and remains the world's largest economy, but the commitment that the Middle East would require from the US at this time of multiple wars and revolutions is by no means the kind of commitment the US is ready to impart. In a way, the US has "lost" the Middle East.

Even the "pivot" to Asia is likely to end in shambles. On the one hand, the US's opponents, Russia notwithstanding, have grown much more assertive in recent years. They too have their own agendas, which will keep the US and its willing European allies busy for years. The Russian move against Crimea had once more exposed the limits of US and NATO in regions outside the conventional parameters of Western influence.

If the US proved resourceful enough to stage a fight in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the battle - over energy supplies, potential reserves, markets and routes - is likely to be the most grueling yet. China is not Iraq before the US invasion - broken by decades of war, siege and sanctions. Its geography is too vast to besiege, and its military too massive to destroy with a single shock and awe.

The US has truly lost the initiative, in the Middle East region and beyond it. The neo-cons' drunkenness with military power led to costly wars that have overwhelmed the empire beyond salvation. Now, US foreign-policy makers are mere diplomatic firefighters, from Palestine, to Syria to Ukraine. For the Americans, the last few years have been less a "reality check", more the new reality itself.