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How Washington Creates Global Instability

By Tom Engelhardt

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It was built for... well, not to put too fine a point on it, victory. I'm talking, of course, about the ill-named Camp Victory, the massive military complex, a set of bases really, constructed around an old hunting lodge and nine of former dictator Saddam Hussein's opulent palaces near Baghdad International Airport.

Within months of American troops entering Baghdad in April 2003, it was [already](#) "the largest overseas American combat base since the Vietnam War." It would become the grand visiting place for American politicians — back when the U.S. was still being called *the* global "hyperpower" — arriving in what was almost imagined as our 51st state. It was the headquarters for the American military effort and later "surge" strategy in Iraq. It was also the stomping grounds for at least 46,000 U.S. troops stationed there and who knows how many spooks, contractors, hire-a-guns, Defense Department civilians, and [third-world workers](#). It had its own Cinnabon and Burger King, its massive PXs, and its 27-mile perimeter of "blast walls and concertina wire," as well as its own hospital and water-bottling plant. It was a "city," a world, unto itself.

American reporters passed through it regularly, and yet for most Americans who didn't set foot in it, our massive outpost in the heart of the oil heartlands of the planet (the place we were supposed to [garrison for decades](#), if not generations) might as well not have existed. For all the news about Iraq that, once upon a time, was delivered to Americans, the humongous Camp Victory itself never struck journalists as particularly newsworthy, nor generally did the billions

of dollars that went into building the more than 500 U.S. bases, mega to micro, that we now know were constructed in that country at U.S. taxpayers' expense.

All this was true until Camp Victory was at the edge of what can only be called ultimate defeat and finally found, if not its chronicler, then its [obituary writer](#) in Annie Gowan of the *Washington Post*. Perhaps it's often true that only at a funeral do any of us get our due. But with the last American slated to leave Camp Victory ([though](#) not [Iraq](#)) in early December, with the gates to be locked and the keys turned over to the Iraqi government, she quotes Lt. Col. Sean Wilson, an Army public affairs officer, on the emptying of the base this way: "This whole place is becoming a ghost town. You get the feeling you're the last person on Earth." (Of course, Iraqis might have a different impression.)

The U.S. military will evidently conduct no final interment ceremonies in which the base is renamed Camp Defeat before being abandoned. Nonetheless, even as Washington [hangs on grimly](#) to its remaining militarized toeholds in Iraq, that should be the one-line summary obit on America's great Iraq adventure.

In his latest [piece of reportage](#) for TomDispatch, Nick Turse offers us an eye-opening reminder that, while the U.S. is drawing down to bare bones in Iraq, it has actually been building up its forces, operations, and infrastructure in the Greater Middle East. Still, somewhere in the Camp Victory story, isn't there a modest lesson that Washington could draw? (Though, as Turse makes clear, it won't...) *Tom*

Obama's Arc of Instability

Destabilizing the world one region at a time
by Nick Turse

It's a story that should take your breath away: the destabilization of what, in the Bush years, used to be called "the arc of instability." It involves at least 97 countries, across the bulk of the global south, much of it coinciding with the oil heartlands of the planet. A startling number of these nations are now in turmoil, and in every single one of them — from Afghanistan and Algeria to Yemen and Zambia — Washington is militarily involved, overtly or covertly, in outright war or what passes for peace.

Garrisoning the planet is just part of it. The Pentagon and U.S. intelligence services are also running covert special forces and spy operations, launching drone attacks, building bases and secret prisons, training, arming, and funding local security forces, and engaging in a host of other militarized activities right up to full-scale war. But while you consider this, keep one fact in mind: the odds are that there is no longer a single nation in the arc of instability in which the United States is in no way militarily involved.

Covenant of the Arc

"Freedom is on the march in the broader Middle East," the president said in his speech. "The hope of liberty now reaches from Kabul to Baghdad to Beirut and beyond. Slowly but surely,

we're helping to transform the broader Middle East from an arc of instability into an arc of freedom.”

An arc of freedom. You could be forgiven if you thought that this was an excerpt from President Barack Obama's [Arab Spring speech](#), where he said, “[I]t will be the policy of the United States to ... support transitions to democracy.” Those were, however, the words of his predecessor George W. Bush. The giveaway is that phrase “arc of instability,” a core rhetorical concept of the former president's global vision and that of his [neoconservative supporters](#).

The dream of the Bush years was to militarily dominate that arc, which largely coincided with the area from North Africa to the Chinese border, also known as the Greater Middle East, but sometimes was said to stretch from Latin America to Southeast Asia. While the phrase has been dropped in the Obama years, when it comes to projecting military power, President Obama is in the process of trumping his predecessor.

In addition to waging more wars in “arc” nations, Obama has overseen the deployment of greater numbers of special operations forces to the region, has transferred or brokered the sale of substantial quantities of weapons there, while continuing to build and expand military bases at a torrid rate, and has trained and supplied large numbers of indigenous forces. Pentagon documents and open-source information indicate that there is not a single country in that arc in which U.S. military and intelligence agencies are not now active. This raises questions about just how crucial the American role has been in the region's increasing volatility and destabilization.

Flooding the Arc

Given the centrality of the arc of instability to Bush administration thinking, it was hardly surprising that it launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and carried out limited strikes in three other arc states — [Yemen](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Somalia](#). Nor should anyone have been shocked that it also deployed elite [military forces](#) and special operators from the Central Intelligence Agency elsewhere within [the arc](#).

In his book *The One Percent Doctrine*, journalist Ron Suskind reported on CIA plans, unveiled in September 2001 and known as the “Worldwide Attack Matrix,” for “detailed operations against terrorists in 80 countries.” At about the same time, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld [proclaimed](#) that the nation had embarked on “a large multi-headed effort that probably spans 60 countries.” By the end of the Bush years, the Pentagon would indeed have special operations forces deployed in 60 countries around the world.

It has been the Obama administration, however, that has embraced the concept far more fully and engaged the region even more broadly. Last year, the *Washington Post* reported that U.S. had [deployed](#) special operations forces in 75 countries, from South America to Central Asia. Recently, however, U.S. Special Operations Command spokesman Col. Tim Nye told me that on any given day, America's elite troops are working in about 70 countries and that its country total by year's end would be around [120](#). These forces are engaged in a host of missions, from [Army Rangers](#) involved in conventional combat in Afghanistan to the team of [Navy SEALs](#) who assassinated Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, to trainers from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and

Marines within U.S. Special Operations Command working globally from the [Dominican Republic](#) to [Yemen](#).

The United States is now involved in wars in six arc-of-instability nations: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. It has military personnel deployed in other arc states, including Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Of these countries, [Afghanistan](#), Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates all [host](#) U.S. military bases, while the CIA is reportedly building a [secret base](#) somewhere in the region for use in its expanded drone wars in Yemen and Somalia. It is also using already existing facilities in [Djibouti](#), [Ethiopia](#), and the [United Arab Emirates](#) for the same purposes and operating a clandestine [base in Somalia](#) where it runs indigenous agents and carries out counterterrorism training for local partners.

In addition to its own military efforts, the Obama administration has also arranged for the [sale of weaponry](#) to regimes in arc states across the Middle East, including [Bahrain](#), Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and [Yemen](#). It has been indoctrinating and schooling indigenous military partners through the State Department's and Pentagon's International Military Education and Training program. Last year, it provided training to more than 7,000 students from 130 countries. "The emphasis is on the Middle East and Africa because we know that terrorism will grow, and we know that vulnerable countries are the most targeted," Kay Judkins, the program's policy manager, recently told the American Forces Press Service.

According to Pentagon documents released earlier this year, the U.S. has personnel — some in token numbers, some in more sizable contingents — deployed in 76 [other nations sometimes counted in the arc of instability](#): Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Syria, Antigua, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

While arrests of 30 members of an alleged [CIA spy ring in Iran](#) earlier this year may be, like earlier incarcerations of [supposed American "spies"](#), [pure theater](#) for internal consumption or international bargaining, there is little doubt that the U.S. is conducting covert operations there, too. Last year, [reports surfaced](#) that U.S. black ops teams had been authorized to run missions inside that country, and spies and local proxies are almost certainly at work there as well. Just recently, the *Wall Street Journal* [revealed](#) a series of "secret operations on the Iran-Iraq border" by the U.S. military and a coming CIA campaign of covert operations aimed at halting the smuggling of Iranian arms into Iraq.

All of this suggests that there may, in fact, not be a single nation within the arc of instability, however defined, in which the United States is without a base or military or intelligence personnel, or where it is not running agents, sending weapons, conducting covert operations — or at war.

The Arc of History

Just after President Obama came into office in 2009, then-Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair briefed the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Drawing special attention to the arc of instability, he summed up the global situation this way: “The large region from the Middle East to South Asia is the locus for many of the challenges facing the United States in the twenty-first century.” Since then, as with the [Bush-identified phrase](#) “global war on terror,” the Obama administration and the U.S. military have largely avoided using “arc of instability,” preferring to refer to it using far vaguer formulations.

During a speech at the National Defense Industrial Association’s annual Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Symposium earlier this year, for example, Navy Adm. Eric Olson, then the chief of U.S. Special Operations Command, pointed toward a composite satellite image of the world at night. Before Sept. 11, 2001, said Olson, the lit portion of the planet — the industrialized nations of the global north — were considered the key areas. Since then, he told the audience, 51 countries, almost all of them in the arc of instability, have taken precedence. “Our strategic focus,” he said, “has shifted largely to the south ... certainly within the special operations community, as we deal with the emerging threats from the places where the lights aren’t.”

More recently, in remarks at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., John O. Brennan, the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, outlined the president’s new [National Strategy for Counterterrorism](#), which highlighted carrying out missions in the “Pakistan-Afghanistan region” and “a focus on specific regions, including what we might call the periphery — places like Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and the Maghreb [northern Africa].”

“This does not,” Brennan insisted, “require a ‘global’ war” — and indeed, despite the Bush-era terminology, it never has. While, for instance, planning for the 9/11 attacks took place in Germany and would-be shoe-bomber Richard Reid hailed from the United Kingdom, advanced, majority-white Western nations have never been American targets. The “arc” has never arced out of the global south, whose countries are assumed to be fundamentally unstable by nature and their problems fixable through military intervention.

Building Instability

A decade’s evidence has made it clear that U.S. operations in the arc of instability are destabilizing. For years, to take one example, Washington has wielded military aid, military actions, and diplomatic pressure in such a way as to [undermine](#) the government of Pakistan, [promote factionalism](#) within its military and intelligence services, and stoke [anti-American](#)

[sentiment](#) to remarkable levels among the country's population. (According to a [recent survey](#), just 12 percent of Pakistanis have a positive view of the United States.)

A semi-secret drone war in that nation's tribal borderlands, involving hundreds of missile strikes and significant, if unknown levels, of civilian casualties, has been only the most polarizing of Washington's many ham-handed efforts. When it comes to that CIA-run effort, a recent [Pew survey](#) of Pakistanis found that 97 percent of respondents viewed it negatively, a figure almost impossible to achieve in any sort of polling.

In Yemen, long-time support — in the form of aid, military training, and weapons, as well as periodic air or drone strikes — for dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh led to a special relationship between the U.S. and elite Yemeni forces led by Saleh's relatives. [This year, those units](#) have been instrumental in cracking down on the freedom struggle there, [killing protesters](#) and arresting dissenting officers who [refused orders](#) to open fire on civilians. It's hardly surprising that, even before Yemen slid into a [leaderless void](#) (after Saleh was wounded in an assassination attempt), a survey of Yemenis found — again a jaw-dropping polling figure — 99 percent of respondents viewed the U.S. government's relations with the Islamic world unfavorably, while just 4 percent “somewhat” or “strongly approved” of Saleh's cooperation with Washington.

Instead of pulling back from operations in Yemen, however, the U.S. has doubled down. The [CIA](#), with support from Saudi Arabia's intelligence service, has been running local agents as well as a lethal drone campaign aimed at Islamic militants. The [U.S. military](#) has been carrying out its own airstrikes, as well as sending in more trainers to work with indigenous forces, while American [black-ops teams](#) launch lethal missions, often alongside Yemeni allies.

These efforts have set the stage for further ill-will, political instability, and possible blowback. Just last year, a U.S. [drone strike](#) accidentally killed Jabr al-Shabwani, the son of strongman Sheikh Ali al-Shabwani. In an act of revenge, Ali repeatedly attacked one of Yemen's largest oil pipelines, resulting in billions of dollars in lost revenue for the Yemeni government, and demanded Saleh stop cooperating with the U.S. strikes.

Earlier this year, in Egypt and Tunisia, long-time U.S. efforts to promote what it liked to call “regional stability” — through military alliances, aid, training, and weaponry — collapsed in the face of popular movements against the U.S.-supported dictators ruling those nations. Similarly, in [Bahrain](#), [Iraq](#), [Jordan](#), [Kuwait](#), [Morocco](#), [Oman](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and the [United Arab Emirates](#), popular protests erupted against authoritarian regimes partnered with and armed courtesy of the U.S. military. It's hardly surprising that, when asked in a recent survey whether President Obama had met the expectations created by his [2009 speech in Cairo](#), where he called for “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world,” only 4 percent of Egyptians answered yes. (The same poll found only 6 percent of Jordanians thought so and just 1 percent of Lebanese.)

A recent Zogby poll of respondents in six Arab countries — Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates — found that, taking over from a president who had propelled anti-Americanism in the Muslim world to an [all-time high](#), Obama managed to drive

such attitudes even higher. Substantial majorities of Arabs in every country now view the U.S. as not contributing “to peace and stability in the Arab World.”

Increasing Instability Across the Globe

U.S. interference in the arc of instability is certainly nothing new. Leaving aside current wars, over the last century, the United States has engaged in military interventions in the global south in Cambodia, Congo, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Egypt, Grenada, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Libya, Panama, the Philippines, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Somalia, Thailand, and Vietnam, among other places. The CIA has waged covert campaigns in many of the same countries, as well as Afghanistan, Algeria, Chile, Ecuador, Indonesia, Iran, and Syria, to name just a few.

Like George W. Bush before him, Barack Obama evidently looks out on the “unlit world” and sees a source of global volatility and danger for the United States. His answer has been to deploy U.S. military might to blunt instability, shore up allies, and protect American lives.

Despite the salient lesson of 9/11— interventions abroad beget blowback at home — he has waged wars in response to blowback that have, in turn, generated more of the same. A recent Rasmussen poll indicates that most Americans differ with the president when it comes to his idea of how the U.S. should be involved abroad. Seventy-five percent of voters, for example, [agreed with](#) this proposition in a recent poll: “The United States should not commit its forces to military action overseas unless the cause is vital to our national interest.” In addition, clear majorities of Americans are against defending Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and a host of other arc of instability countries, even if they are attacked by outside powers.

After decades of overt and covert U.S. interventions in arc states, including the last 10 years of constant warfare, most are still poor, underdeveloped, and seemingly even more unstable. This year, in their annual [failed state index](#) — a ranking of the most volatile nations on the planet — *Foreign Policy* and the Fund for Peace placed the two arc nations that have seen the largest military interventions by the U.S. — Iraq and Afghanistan — in their top 10. Pakistan and Yemen ranked 12th and 13th, respectively, while Somalia — the site of U.S. interventions under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, during the [Bush presidency](#) in the 2000s, and again under Obama — had the dubious honor of being number one.

For all the discussions here about (armed) “nation-building efforts” in the region, what we’ve clearly witnessed is a decade of nation unbuilding that ended only when the peoples of various Arab lands took their futures into their own hands and their bodies out into the streets. As recent polling in arc nations indicates, people of the global south see the United States as promoting or sustaining, not preventing, instability, and objective measures bear out their claims. The fact that numerous popular uprisings opposing authoritarian rulers allied with the U.S. have proliferated this year provides the strongest evidence yet of that.

With Americans balking at defending arc-of-instability nations, with clear indications that military interventions don’t promote stability, and with a budget crisis of epic proportions at home, it remains to be seen what pretexts the Obama administration will rely on to continue a

failed policy — one that seems certain to make the world more volatile and put American citizens at greater risk.