

What Trump Needs to Know About the Middle East

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/12/04/what_trump_needs_to_know_about_the_middle_east_132489.html

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December 04, 2016

As he has in nearly every domain and for most every issue, President-elect Donald Trump has offered blunt assessments and unequivocal opinions about Middle East politics.

“Containing the spread of radical Islam must be a major foreign policy goal of the United States,” he declared. Military force may be necessary, “but it’s also a philosophical struggle, like our long struggle in the Cold War.”

Trump vowed to scrap the Iran deal, which he described as “horrible and laughable,” and re-impose economic sanctions. Otherwise, he said, the Obama administration’s prized foreign policy achievement will continue to enable Iran to pursue hegemonic ambitions in the region, fuel “nuclear proliferation throughout the region,” and allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and deliver them by means of ballistic missiles within the decade.

He promises to team up with Russia to employ decisive military action to defeat and destroy ISIS, which he condemns for undermining Iraq and stealing its oil, ruining Syria, and “carrying out a genocide against Christians in the Middle East.” He would compel Saudi Arabia (and other wealthy countries), whose security the United States guarantees, to contribute more to its own defense.

He regards Israel as a “strategic ally” and a “cultural brother” bound to the United States by “unbreakable friendship.” Since “the United Nations is not a friend of democracy,” he rejects a U.N.-imposed resolution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. But because of his success in making business deals, he believes that he is just the man to broker what he characterized as “the ultimate deal.”

Trump’s cocksure pronouncements show an instinctive appreciation for the importance in foreign affairs of standing by your friends and keeping your adversaries in check. That itself involves a welcome sea change from President Obama’s approach to the Middle East, which has indulged America’s adversaries and constrained America’s friends.

In “Ike’s Gamble: America’s Rise to Dominance in the Middle East,” Michael Doran provides a potent reminder that the United States has a long history of confusion about friends and adversaries in the region and about the policies that will best serve America’s national interests. A Hudson Institute senior fellow and former Middle East adviser in the Bush 43 White House, Doran sure-handedly reveals the errors of the “honest broker paradigm” that

in the 1950s initially guided Dwight Eisenhower's two-term presidency. With a sharp eye for the complex realities of Middle East politics, Doran endorses Ike's eventual shift to the view that the United States must "manage inter-Arab conflict."

The honest broker paradigm grew out of the dominant view at the State Department, initially shared by Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, that Arab resentment over Western imperialism and bitterness over American solicitousness toward Israel necessitated a distancing from the Jewish state and a balancing tilt toward Arab states. Eisenhower and Dulles also believed that Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser—who led the 1952 overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy—"was honest, forthright, and deeply desirous of an alliance with the West."

Accordingly, Eisenhower bet on Egypt, "the largest and most influential Arab country," at the expense of British and French regional interests, of Israeli security, and, at least in the short term, of other Arab states' political ambitions. Ike wagered that the charismatic young military officer would lead not only Egypt but Arabs throughout the Middle East into an alliance with the United States in the Cold War.

So Eisenhower acquiesced to Nasser's ouster of Britain's troops from the Suez Canal Zone and offered to finance the construction of Nasser's Aswan High Dam project (Dulles eventually revoked the offer). After Egypt's July 1956 nationalization of the canal, followed by the seizure three months later of the Sinai Peninsula by Israel in coordination with France and Britain, Eisenhower sided with the Soviet Union; "in a manner that was relentless, ruthless, and uncompromising," he compelled the three democracies to withdraw.

By 1959, however, Nasser was championing a belligerent pan-Arabism and had ushered Egypt as well as Syria and Iraq into the Soviet bloc.

The consensus among historians is that American Middle East policy went astray in the 1950s because of a failure to truly appreciate, as most officials at the time believed, "that Nasser was the foremost representative of deep and inexorable historical forces" in the Arab world. Many experts today persist in thinking that America continues to botch Middle East policy because it refuses to take seriously the depth of Arab and Muslim anger over Western imperialism and support for Israel.

Based on meticulous sifting of speeches, notes of official meetings, letters, diaries, and more, Doran refutes this conventional view and writes a history more in line with the facts. The problem was not what the West did to the Arabs but what Arabs were unable to do for themselves. Eisenhower, Doran shows, was among the first to recognize that his Middle East policy collapsed because his administration had not understood the bitter and deep divisions and strong anti-democratic tendencies that destabilized the Arab world and had not recognized Israel's stabilizing role in the region.

Doran draws five large lessons from Eisenhower's diplomacy. First, instead of coddling enemies and demeaning friends, U.S. leaders and policymakers—in accordance with ancient wisdom and common sense—should support friends and rein in enemies.

Second, they should reject the constantly disproved assumption—discredited before Eisenhower left office and refuted for all eyes to see by the bloodletting sparked by the uprisings of 2011, formerly known as the Arab Spring—that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the Arab world's central strategic challenge.

Third, they should concentrate on inter-Arab politics and the Muslim dimensions of the fighting raging across the Middle East.

Fourth, they should adopt a “tragic perspective”: because of the ethnic, nationalist, and religious convulsions shaking the Arab and Muslim world, “American policy can exacerbate or ameliorate the major conflicts” in the region “but it can rarely solve them.”

Finally, American leaders and policymakers must ever remain mindful of sociologist Max Weber's observation that while nations pursue their interests, leaders interpret those interests and devise policies for advancing them based on often-unarticulated assumptions and overarching ideas about human nature, morality, and politics. The successful conduct of foreign policy depends on grasping these assumptions and ideas and understanding their impact.

A culminating lesson follows from these five, one that President-elect Trump, who has relied so heavily on his instincts, should take to heart. He should appoint advisers and experts steeped in the language, culture, history, and religions of the Middle East to refine his understanding of America's friends and adversaries there. And he will need advisers and experts of another sort as well: ones who strengthen his awareness of the unexamined and debatable notions that generate his blunt assessments and unequivocal opinions.

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