

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The U.S. Disengagement from the Middle East: The Consequences

In terms of the Middle East, President Obama's major goal has been US withdrawal and disengagement from this region. This is evident in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Syria and in his negotiations with Iran. Many foreign policy specialists are lamenting Obama's policy decision. For example, Walter Russell Mead has argued that Russia, China and Iran are now taking advantage of this power vacuum created in the Middle East by Obama's withdrawal. The recent book by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates gives credence to Obama's lack of commitment to Iraq and to Afghanistan. Only one thing was on his mind—withdrawal. That disengagement from the Middle East is defining Obama's foreign policy is seen by most as a given. However, we are now beginning to see the consequences of this foreign policy decision. What are some of those consequences?

- First is the work of Secretary of State John Kerry. Despite the horrific civil war in Syria, which is destroying that nation and creating a venue for al Qaeda's rejuvenation, despite the increasing role of Hezbollah in that civil war, and despite the increased role of Iran across the Middle East, Kerry is focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Is this the proper emphasis for the US at this time in history? Why has Kerry chosen this focus, when withdrawal characterizes every other dimension of Obama's Middle East policy? Even if, by some miracle, some kind of agreement is reached, will it have any positive effect on the focal points of major instability in the region—Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Egypt or Iran? The obvious answer is there will be no significant impact on any of these Middle Eastern hotspots. Even those who support Obama are puzzled by this concentration of time and energy by Secretary Kerry. If Israel were to negotiate some kind of arrangement with the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, would never recognize the agreement. Neither will Hezbollah, whose forces are becoming battle-hardened in their military support of Syria. Further, their supply of sophisticated missiles has increased over the last 18 months. None of these realities enhance the security of our only reliable ally in the region. Iran will never recognize an agreement the Palestinian Authority makes either. So, why is this *the* priority of this administration? If Kerry is successful, which is dubious at best, it would have virtually no impact in any other aspect of the region's mounting instability. The relentless pressure he is placing on Israel to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority will hardly increase Israel's security or promote stability in any other area of the Middle East.
- Second, consider Iraq. Respectable foreign policy columnist, David Ignatius, recently argued that "In Iraq, where the US spent a trillion dollars and thousands of lives, the government is now effectively an Iranian client, but that hasn't drawn a US reaction. In Afghanistan, where the US devoted enormous effort, President Hamid Karzai thumbs his nose at America and gets away with it. Foreign leaders worry that Obama doesn't see that US power is fading."

This observation highlights the primary point of what is going on in the region: A sectarian struggle between the Shiites and the Sunnis; between Iran and its proxies (representing Shiite Islam); and Saudi Arabia and its proxies (representing Sunni Islam). In this sectarian struggle, many analysts now argue that President Obama has placed the US on the side of Iran and its proxies in Lebanon and Syria. As Hoover Institution specialist Fouad Ajami demonstrates, Iran and Syria made an informal alliance in the 1980s when the father of the current Syrian ruler sided with the Iranian revolutionary regime in its war with Saddam Hussein. The current ruler, Bashar Assad, is more significantly dependent on Iran than his father. The growing influence of Iran is, to say the least, troubling to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the smaller Persian Gulf states. Traditional and loyal American allies are now questioning what Obama is doing. It makes little sense to them and in fact it frightens them. Since Iraq is an important indicator of Iranian influence, Ignatius points out that the Obama administration, in its rush to “leave [Iraq], allowed the sectarian government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to undo many of the gains made against al Qaeda.” Further, Iran has waged a brilliant covert-action campaign that “turned Maliki into virtual clients of Tehran—and in the process alienated Sunnis and pushed them toward extremism.” Therefore, al Qaeda fighters have moved into both Syria and Iraq and declared the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Their resurgence in Anbar province of Iraq, especially Fallujah, has been stunning. This is the very area where so many American soldiers died. ISIS, under its principal leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, as *Time* magazine has argued, “represent a clear and present danger to America’s allies and interests in the broader Middle East . . . The war in Syria has made ISIS the strongest al Qaeda franchise.” I believe that history will demonstrate that al Qaeda’s resurgence can be tied to Obama’s withdrawal from this region. The vacuum left by US withdrawal is being filled by Iran on one side and Islamic extremism, principally al Qaeda, on the other. In fact, in a recent and detailed survey of the Middle Eastern instability by the *New York Times*, the cluster of reporters who did the research concluded that there is now “the emergence of a post-American Middle East in which no broker has the power, or the will, to contain the region’s sectarian hatreds.” In addition, as extremism on both sides hardens, the bitter rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has produced leaders who “cynically deploy a sectarian agenda that makes almost any sort of accommodation a heresy.” The vacuum left by American withdrawal caused Saudi Arabia to pledge \$3 billion to the Lebanese Army, a strikingly bold attempt to “reassert influence in a country where Iran has long played a dominant proxy role through Hezbollah, the Shiite movement its finances and arms.” With no decisive leadership from the US in the Syrian civil war, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are arming and recruiting fighters in that civil war. Sunni Muslims from Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, etc. have joined the rebels, many of whom are now fighting alongside al Qaeda, against Syria; Shiites from Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen and even African Islamists are joining with the militias loyal to Bashar Assad’s army.

History will demonstrate that President Obama’s decisive and intentional withdrawal from major involvement in the Middle East (other than promoting an unworkable and unwise Israeli-Palestinian negotiation initiative) has been catastrophic. Ignatius counsels wisely that Obama “needs to be more strategic and less political. He needs to set a vision and articulate it to allies and adversaries. His national security adviser needs to help him focus and communicate policy decisions. These criticisms were true in the era {Robert] Gates describes [in his new book],

when the president was surrounded by strong personalities. It's even true now, when the cast is less experienced." President Obama's successor and the people of the United States will need to live with the consequences of Obama's disastrous short-sightedness as a foreign policy leader.

See David Ignatius in www.washingtonpost.com (8 January and 13 January 2014), and the *Omaha World Herald* (22 December 2013); Fouad Ajami in the *Wall Street Journal* (10 January 2014); Ben Hubbard, Robert F. Worth and Michael R. Gordon in the *New York Times* (5 January 2014); *The Economist* (11 January 2014), pp. 39-40; and Aryn Baker in *Time* (20 January 2014), pp. 31-35.