

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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January 14, 2017

The Withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East: The Consequences

The post-World War II international order, organized by the United States, is coming apart. There is probably no more poignant example of this truth than the Middle East. The US has been the key to relative stability and order in the notoriously complex Middle East. From the creation of Israel in 1948, through the wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973, the United States brokered the peace that ultimately preserved the existence of Israel and kept the major powers (e.g., the Soviet Union and now Russia, as well as Iran) at bay. Under Presidents Carter, Clinton, Bush and Reagan, the US brokered peace deals between Israel and its neighbors based on the premise of “land for peace.” No longer! Under President Obama, the US has strategically withdrawn from the Middle East (witness Syria) and has increasingly blamed Israel for the absence of substantive negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel based on land for peace. The nuclear deal with Iran has resulted in the even more aggressive surge of Iran as the dominant threat to a strategic balance of power in the region.

There are two primary developments in the waning days of Obama’s administration that illustrate the serious consequences of American withdrawal from the Middle East:

- First is the war in Syria. Columnist Richard Cohen recently argued that Obama is “a 21st-century man who never quite appreciated the lessons of the 20th. He has been all too happy to preside over the loss of American influence. Aleppo, Syria, now a pile of rubble, is where countless died—as did American influence . . . The city hemorrhaged civilian dead, and America, once the preeminent power in the region, did virtually nothing.” Obama’s policy of retreat and withdrawal resulted in the complete absence of any deterrence in the region. Obama called for the overthrow of Assad in Syria, but for each “red line” he drew in the sand, he never backed up his verbal threats with meaningful deterrence. Hence, Russia and Iran filled the vacuum. Because of Russia’s relentless bombing, Assad has been effectively restored to his throne. But the price for that is that Assad is now the puppet of both Russia and Iran. Columnist Charles Krauthammer correctly observes that “Syria is now a platform, a forward base, from which both these revisionist regimes can project power in the region. Iran will use Syria to advance its drive to dominate the Arab Middle East. Russia will use its naval and air bases to bully the Sunni Arab states, and to shut out American influence.” And it is already occurring. The foreign and defense ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey began discussions to end the civil war in Syria. More extensive meetings are set for later in January in Kazakhstan. For the first time in four decades, the US, once the dominant power in the region, was not invited. It is irrelevant! Editorially, the *Wall Street Journal* commented that “Obama’s foreign policy of American retreat has left the world’s

authoritarians advancing more aggressively than at any time since the 1970s. The tragic lesson of Syria is that when the eagle flies away, the vultures move in.”

- Second is the truly incredible action of the US during a recent vote in the UN Security Council. When Resolution 2334 came before the Security Council, the US abstained from voting and the Resolution passed, to the thunderous applause of those in attendance. Resolution 2334 condemned Israel for its settlement policies in the West Bank and in Jerusalem. For the past 35 years, every American administration, including Obama in 2011, has protected Israel with the US veto because “such a Security Council resolution gives immense legal ammunition to every boycotter, anti-Semite and zealous European prosecutor to penalize and punish Israelis.” In the words of Douglas J. Feith of the Hudson Institute, “The resolution describes Israel’s West Bank towns and East Jerusalem neighborhoods as settlements that are a ‘major obstacle’ to peace. But there was a life-or-death Arab-Israeli conflict before those areas were built, and before Israel acquired the West Bank in the 1967 war.” The resolution says that Jewish West Bank and Jerusalem “settlements” have “no legal validity.” The resolution declares the territories and East Jerusalem legally Palestinian—without the Palestinians needing to concede anything, let alone peace. Resolution 2334 explicitly condemns East Jerusalem. Krauthammer: “America acquiesces to a declaration that, as a matter of international law, the Jewish state has no claim on the Western Wall, the Temple Mount, indeed the entire Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem. They belong to Palestine.” The resolution thus depicts Israel as an international law-breaker. The US abstention from the Security Council vote was followed up by a lengthy speech by Secretary of State John Kerry, who blasted and harangued Israel. Even the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Theresa May, declared, “We do not . . . believe that the way to negotiate peace is by focusing on only one issue. And we do not believe that it is appropriate to attack the composition of the democratically-elected government of an ally. . . . We are also clear that the settlements are far from the only problem in this conflict. In particular, the people of Israel deserve to live free from the threat of terrorism, with which they have had to cope for too long.”

One final comment about Kerry’s speech: The peace parameters he offered in his speech are nearly identical to those offered by Israel during the waning days of the Clinton administration in 2000 and those offered by Israel in 2008. In both instances, the Palestinians rejected the offer! How can John Kerry blame Israel? Jewish settlements are not the main obstacle to peace. If they were, Gaza, which Israel gave back to the Palestinians with absolutely no guarantee of peace, should be a thriving land of peace and prosperity. It is not; it is the center of a terrorist state bent on the destruction of Israel. The obstacle to peace is Palestinian rejection of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state with recognized borders.

The US has abandoned significant leadership in the Middle East—and the carnage in Syria is the primary evidence of that proposition. The US has also abandoned moral leadership in the Middle East—and the primary evidence of that is US abstention on UN Resolution 2334.

See the editorials in the *Wall Street Journal* (29 December 2016 and 31 December 2016-1 January 2017); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (29 December and 22 December 2016); Jennifer Rubin in the *Washington Post* (30 December 2016); Douglas J. Feith in the *Wall Street Journal* (29 December 2016); and Richard Cohen in the *Washington Post* (26 December 2016).