

Perspectives

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Washington's Dilemma

by Lawrence Wilkerson

Nader Hashemi, Assistant Professor of Middle East and Islamic Politics at the University of Denver, speaking on TheRealNews on 19 February 2011, observed: "U.S. policy [in the Middle East and North Africa] is starting to unravel..." I would add, in western Asia as well because from Islamabad to Kabul to Tehran the jagged edges of broken policies are flapping in the wind. Like the collapsed sails of a stricken ship, these policies will no longer power America to success.

More concerning than the policy disarray itself, however, is the clear fact that the leadership in Washington is largely unaware of how bad the situation actually is and, partly as a consequence, has not the slightest idea what to do about the unraveling of its half-century-old policies other than to equivocate, parse its words, and hope for the least worst developments. Moreover, of grave concern is the tendency, now quite apparent from statements by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—the most powerful individual in the Obama administration—and Secretary of State Clinton, that the current turmoil in the region of the Persian Gulf should somehow be exploited to achieve regime change in Iran. The increasingly potent demand of the people of Iran, unlike those of the Arab states, is not for the ouster of their government but for its more focused and positive attention on the people's rights, demands, and economic livelihood. Perhaps no single U.S. action toward the region, other than the use of military forces against Iran, could be more counterproductive and dangerous for the long term-interests of the region or the U.S. and its allies.

The U.S. mainstream media, such as it is, is not any better than Washington's leaders. Focusing on the principle of "fear is best", they rail about everything from the rising price of oil to the volatility of the stock markets to the pursuit of nuclear weapons by Tehran, as if any of this were any true indicator of the tectonic plates shifting in the world of global political power. Omitted almost entirely is an in-depth examination of how U.S. policies since FDR have helped bring about both the positive and the negative aspects of these power shifts and how, today, the U.S. is ensnared by both aspects—and must ease away from the one while not seeming too responsible for the other lest it be corrupted or even stillborn.

For more than half a century we have accommodated tyrants essentially to provide security for the passage of non-renewable fossil fuels to ourselves and our allies. For that same length of time our example as a "shining city upon a hill" (however dull the light at times) and as the world's most powerful economy, the engine of globalization

(however selfish our trade practices at times), and, more recently, as a promoter of NGO-fomented dissidence-in-the-ranks from Kiev to Cairo (not to mention as inventor of the Internet and associated technology), have excited young people toward freedom and democracy.

It is not as if we have not been here before. In the initial stages of the Cold War, the U.S. dispatched CIA and other elements into Eastern Europe to excite the masses to freedom. At the same time, we hired former high-

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level NAZIs to help with intelligence gathering on the Soviets. This pernicious amalgam of policies produced a mess, ranging from the uprising in 1956 in Hungary, for example, that simply got the people we had excited about freedom slaughtered in the streets of Budapest when the promised U.S. assistance failed to materialize, to the strongest and most powerful political and military alliance in modern history, NATO. When the end of that twilight struggle finally came, the

record was mixed. But we the "won" the struggle so no one but us academics really cared about that record.

No one but us academics will care about the U.S. record in western Asia, the Middle East, and north Africa either. But only if we "win".

The central question, then, is how do we do that?

First and foremost, there is no template. One cannot be successful in Egypt, for example, and move best practices to Bahrain and expect to succeed there as well. Each country, each situation, is different—sometimes markedly so. This means the demand for exquisitely shaped, coordinated but decentralized diplomacy is extremely high. And this presents a problem for the U.S. because during the Cold War, and particularly so since that war's end, the U.S., having militarized its foreign and security policies and consolidated their direction in the White House, believes every problem is a nail and the Pentagon is the hammer.

On the other hand, and fortunately for the U.S., it now has at the helm in Washington a president who has a decided tendency to shy away from this formulation of

hammer and nails. But he is ensnared mightily by the centralized and narrowly-advised decision-making process and by special interests that demand he not shy away too far or for too long. One of the most powerful of the latter is Israel, itself frightened by the power shifts—and not aware apparently that it helped produce them. Thus, it seems equally unaware of what policies to pursue and, I might add, as bereft of exquisite diplomatic skills as its bigger and more powerful ally. As America's Founders pointed out so clearly, over-dependence on the military instrument will always corrupt state leadership.

Secondly, U.S. leadership is well behind the need. Again fortunately, however, there are Americans—individuals and organizations—that are not. Washington should develop a strategy to put these elements in the lead in most cases. They include think-tanks, universities, NGOs and others who actually know and understand what is happening in the countries, from Algiers to Cairo, from Islamabad to Tehran. Washington, whether it is aware of it or not, has been employing many of these elements for several years to excite peoples toward freedom and more representative government. Now, simply let them complete the job in the time and ways they deem best. This includes standing USAID over in the corner and essentially directing it, more often than not, to “butt out”.

Thirdly, the U.S. must deal effectively with the Israel challenge. For far too long we have allowed George Washington's warning to go unheeded. Our first president said eloquently and correctly that “...a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter...” Such wisdom, but where has it gone?

For Israel and the Palestinians, a final settlement producing two viable states living side by side with Jerusalem as the capital of both and recognized by both as the heritage of the world, is the only workable, sustainable answer. And the U.S. must not stand in the way of that achievement as it has done—in its “passionate attachment of one nation for another”—for the past eighteen years.

Fourthly, the U.S. must recognize Iran's right to a leadership role in the Persian Gulf and work with Turkey, Russia, China, India and the EU, as well as the gulf nations, to help Iran become a recognized and welcomed stakeholder in the region. This should include establishing a new security structure in the Gulf that includes Tehran. Discarding the U.S. policy of regime change in Iran is the first crucial step.

Finally, the U.S. needs to wind down operations in Afghanistan and stick to its schedule to do the same in Iraq. Only with U.S. and NATO forces out of Afghanistan will Pakistan ever pick up the pieces of its shattered nation and meld them back together again. Washington must help, but not by killing more and more Pakistanis. Likewise, only by Iraq's standing on its own will the new security structure in the Gulf be possible.

Five policy prescriptions that are easy to write, hard to do. But in all of these policy actions, Washington's hard power is the least needed or involved (for example, even

its special forces teams—cleverly disguised hard power—should come home). What the present tumult and change call for is exquisite diplomacy. Washington needs to cajole, wheedle, convince, collaborate, provide funds from time to time, form concerts of interested parties, and otherwise use its refreshed and reinvigorated political, diplomatic and economic tool box and put its military away for a while. Only then can the social, cultural and institutional foundations be laid, built upon, and expanded so that the yearning for change we are now witnessing is not corrupted or stillborn but is fulfilled and flourishes in a new and dynamic era of freedom.



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