

The United States, The Middle East, and Turkey

Summer 2016

Our election season grinds on. Its denouement is still far off.

The debate has been largely about the style of American leadership and our domestic order. Its most striking feature has been an anguished cry from those who believe our leaders, parties, politics, and economy have left them behind.

Foreign policy has received little attention *per se*, but Donald Trump has called into question long standing assumptions about our alliances, nuclear posture, trade agreements, and relations with our neighbors. He asserts we are a “diluted power,” suffering from a lack of confidence, unable to operate decisively or predictably, and are incapable of seeing the costs of our engagements abroad.

Those who believe Trump’s assumptions and conclusions are wrong, and I include myself among them, need to be careful; we are not answering what are this nation’s core interests:

- Why do we keep troops in Germany, Japan, Korea, and Kuwait?
- Do our post-World War II treaties still serve our needs?
- Do alliances with those like Saudi Arabia make sense?
- What benefits have flowed from our trade agreements?

I will not address all of these questions but I will, in the time ahead, speak to the broad issues we face, challenges to American power, and the problems we confront in dealing with the crisis ridden Middle East.

That region is not the only challenge the United States faces abroad nor the only set of questions our next President will have to address. Not since 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, has the United States been faced with such an array of difficulties:

- Terrorism;
- Ukraine;
- The South China Sea;
- Chaos in the Middle East;
- Putin’s claim he seeks to displace American power;
- China’s more subtly stated intention to do the same.

At particular issue is our place in the world; our ability to influence world events; secure our borders and ensure our prosperity.

Also at issue are the great American designed principles which have shaped the post-World War II world- democracy and free markets. Not can we afford to let the structures of the international system deteriorate to a point where it is difficult to address new issues like climate change.

American Power: Its Uses and Misuses

Our next administration will have to confront the question of American power- *our ability to defend ourselves and influence the course of world events*. We must come to terms with our record over the past 16 years. In so doing, the next President will first have to ask tough questions about the strength of our economy, which is the bedrock of national power, and the instruments we use to protect American interest- our military, intelligence, and diplomatic services.

The starting point should be a frank recognition that George W. Bush's administration over-committed American power and left us with enduring trillion dollar failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. He and his administration did not appreciate one cannot produce order and stability abroad nor advance American principles, by brute force. The Bush Administration failed to define our goals. It did not recognize the ends we sought were not matched either by our means or our national patience.

Our mistakes have had far reaching consequences- particularly rage in much of the Muslim world which fuels wide-spread international terrorism. Of consequence, as well, has been disillusionment at home with the exercise of power, a disillusionment that undermines American statemanship.

Obama was right to retrench. But in drawing back or in failing to engage the United States in dealing with conflicts, like the one in Syria [or Libya], which impacts the entire Middle East, the well-being of our European allies and the balance among great powers, Obama has signaled American retreat.

In answer to a question put to him by young French diplomats, Talleyrand, France's greatest diplomat, said "non-intervention" is a philosophical and metaphysical term which means the same thing as "intervention." When a nation fails to act or commits itself half-heartedly, that nation signals a lack of interest, will or strength.

The examples of Great Britain and the Soviet Union should suffice to make it clear that power is transitory. Power is not only about reality; but it is about perception. No one should doubt we are a powerful nation but, if we do not act on our interests, we send a message that we are in retreat. The international system abhors a vacuum and rivals interpret inaction as an invitation to intervene. The President's repeated hesitations over Syria have called into question US influence. In the Middle East, Putin's Russia is back. And in Asia, China is pressing its claims to the South China Sea.

Let me be clear, to act does not necessarily require the use of military force. That should be held in reserve as a last resort and only when direct and consequential American interests are at stake. By preference, action should be political. The means can be diplomatic. Diplomacy is about gauging an adversary's position, maneuvering and marshalling the power of one's friends and allies.

And it is about acting in a timely manner. Not all crises reveal themselves clearly. The right choice may be obscure. But action is imperative. As the Romans were wont to say “*resist the beginnings*” to avoid an *unpleasant end*.

U.S.-Turkish Relations. Let me begin my presentation with a review of our presently troubled relationship.

My life spans the modern history of the U.S.- Turkish relationship. Forged in the early years of the Cold War, the U.S. and Turkey have been economic and security partners at the official level, since the 1940s; treaty allies and over the years, investors and traders.

Beyond our NATO relationship, Americans have seen Turkey as a vitally important partner in containing Soviet and now Russian power, a major player in dealing with turmoil in the Balkans, the chaos in the Arab World, and with Iran. A strong and prosperous Turkey, in harmony with its neighborhood, has been a long-standing U.S. interest.

While there has not always been a complete identity of views, the Cyprus dispute being an important example of where we diverged, by and large we have worked well together and gone out of our way to accommodate each other's interests. Successive Presidents of the United States and Turkish leaders have forged close personal ties and leading legislators, military officers, businessmen, and intellectuals have done the same.

In the wake of Turkish military coups, Turkey has often been on the receiving end of public and Congressional criticism of its human rights practices. From time to time, the Armenian issue has crossed our domestic screens and roiled waters.

Off and on over the decades, the United States and its policies have provoked anger from Turkish leaders and from the street. Often that anger has been heated.

But never in my experience, has there been a time quite like the present when disagreements with Turkey over Turkey's regional policies and disagreements over its domestic politics have erupted in the United States at the same time. I do not recall either a time quite like the present when U.S. motives have been so sharply impugned in Turkey.

I am bold enough to assert that our common interests and web of connections, developed over the years, are strong enough to help navigate our present rough passage. But we must be frank with each other and respectful. It does our relationship and Turkish interests no good to have the U.S. subjected in Turkey to barrages of angry, overstated, and insulting attacks.

To set the record straight from an American's point of view, let's start with domestic questions. Your President's determination to rewrite the Turkish Constitution and invest additional powers in himself; as well as the arrest and incarceration of journalists and opponents of these political changes has and will continue to draw American public attention, concern, and criticism. Restrictions on free speech and frontal attacks on ethnic minorities, like the Kurds, stir strong reactions.

This criticism will not abate; it is not subject to official discouragement. Nor should it be; we live by our principles as do you and questions of democratic practice, free speech, tolerance, and the rule of law lie at the heart of the American experience. Equally troubling the criticism Turkey is receiving colors our political ties. It is simply impossible for an American administration to ignore expressions of concerns of this nature.

While I believe our relations must be based on national interests, it is not possible to shield fully our relationship from public opinion. The tone, if not the content, of the relationship is being affected. Those like myself who argue for the primacy of national interest, need to make it clear to our Turkish friends that public opinion affects official ties and the ability of our Administrations to give full throated support to out Turkish relationship.

Second, is the question of official policy. At present we face especially difficult questions over the Kurds, the Middle East, Israel, and Iran. Let me start with the Kurds.

The U.S. does not and cannot support an independent Kurdish state or states. We would bear the brunt of the consequences of any attempt to create such an entity or entities, just as would the region and above all Turkey. The effects would be violent, deeply destabilizing, and would last for years.

That said, the security and rights of Kurds should be protected wherever Kurds live, provided they respect the laws of the lands which they inhabit.

Where the Kurds can be allies in dealing with the likes of Da'ish, the U.S. will help them. That help should be discreet, limited, and disassociated from issues related to Kurdish statehood.

Whether or not sub-regional autonomy can be secured for the Kurds in Syria or Iraq, that is a matter of negotiation between Kurds and those governments. For example, in Syria and Iraq, limited sub-regional autonomy may have merit, provided it is not confused with independent statehood.

The United States must stand squarely on Turkey's side whenever there is a threat to Turkish security, including threats from Kurdish elements.

The best way to manage the Kurdish question is political: (a) in Iraq, to encourage a negotiation between the Kurdish leaders, Baghdad, the Shi'ia political leaders and the Sunnis- negotiations which are encouraged by the U.S., Turkey, and Iran; (b) in the case of Syria, to negotiate a ceasefire, transitional regime and final settlement between Syria's government and its several opponents (to the exclusion of Da'ish and al Qaida). The sooner we reach these objectives, the sooner we relieve pressuree on the U.S.-Turkish equation.

In discussing the Kurdish question, let me be clear about an additional point. The U.S. has an interest in political settlements in Syria and Iraq. It has no such interest or standing in questions related to Kurds within Turkey. That is your issue to address and resolve. You alone are masters of your political house and you alone will decide how a discussion about the place of Kurds in Turkish society should be organized.

Israel. The strength of U.S.-Israeli ties are no secret to any of you. They date back to the first day of Israel's independence. Our relations exceed normal boundaries of national interest; they are based on principle and sentiment. Israel is a political fact in America, and plays a role quite unlike any other nation. While I might regret the excesses of Israeli intrusions into American public life, I cannot play down the widespread support Israel enjoys in the United States and its influence on U.S. policies in your region.

It follows that we seek good relations between Israel and friends, like Turkey. For years, these ties were close, second to none. That said, they are no longer which is a source of concern to Washington. I draw comfort from the fact that the Israeli-Turkish relationship appears to be on the mend. It helps that Ankara's voice can be heard again in Tel Aviv.

The Question of Iran. Liberated by the achievement of the JCPOA, U.S. relations with Iran are evolving. They have not reached a final stage. For the moment, the relationship faces sharp opposition from elements in Tehran and Washington. In addition, there are questions of U.S. law which sharply restrict our ability to do business with Iran. When our relations change and in time they should, the region will benefit from U.S.-Iranian detente. The U.S. cannot and will not take sides with Iran against Turkey, Saudi Arabia or any other Arab party; the opposite is true as well. We need to work for a modus vivendi in the Gulf, in particular between Iran and Saudi Arabia. All of us should look forward to "live and let live" arrangements in the Gulf and a recognition of the need for mutual security between Iran and its neighborhood, including Turkey. We might even aspire to designing regional security architecture whose purpose would be to provide a forum for discussion and conflict containment or resolution. But such an arrangement lies well in the future.

In closing my reflection on the Turkish-American relationship, I am reminded of an old habit in the kit bag of diplomats- when you run into a problem that is hard to solve, try enlarging the circle of that problem and see if a solution lies there. The modern Turkish-U.S. relationship has been built over seven decades. Each of the issues I have discussed today has been dealt with many times. Is it not time to broaden the focus of the relationship and increasing the number of topics we treat, reminding ourselves of the value of our ties. The issues we could address include questions like nuclear proliferation, climate change, urbanization, mass migration and economic equality. Our ability to deal with such questions will test our relationship; it will also make clear how important we are to each other.

And I believe the Turkish-American relationship is important.

Now let us turn our attention to the broader issue of the Middle East.

The United States and the Middle East

Five years ago, the Middle East exploded. Regimes fell; civil wars followed in their wake; ancient sectarian divisions resurfaced; ethnic tensions rekindled; regional powers, notably Turkey and Iran, entered the fray and chose proxies. Terror has become a weapon of choice in the hands of fanatics; it has now spread to Europe. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have

paid with their lives and/or are seeking refuge abroad. Europe is staggering with the weight of those fleeing the crisis and European societies are struggling to cope.

Long gone are dreams that the Arab Spring would produce a liberal, democratic order. Instead we hope principally for order and stability. We seek a new balance of power among the region's rivals, the survival of our friends in the region; the recovery of others, like Egypt; and the hope among the region's citizens that they can one day aspire to security, justice, good governance, and the means to earn a living. Peace and stability should now be our objective; without it, there will never be democracy, the rule of law, or respect for human rights.

American statemanship in the Middle East begins with the understanding that we have vital interests at stake. President Obama's recently proclaimed irritation with the region's travails and its players misses the point. We cannot simply stay away nor pivot to Asia. No major power in history has exercised global influence without being able to deal with the Middle East. Its petroleum reserves fuel the international economy. Violence threatens nations of strategic importance to us, notably Israel; and its terror and refugees pose an immediate threat to our allies in Europe.

Strategy for the United States starts with the recognition that the Middle East, including the traumatized Arab world, must take several forms. The region is not a monolith. Strategies must be shaped for each country. Strategy must also address the interests of outside players- Russia; Europe; China; Iran; Turkey- and aim to create a new balance of power (or, if you will, a balance of interests) which in turn can be turned into diplomatic instruments and help contain the region's crises, creating cooperative structures to address crises and maintain settlements.

Our new President has a very tough job to do. He must define American strategy, shape that strategy to meet the circumstances, and act with determination, drawing judiciously on a full array of American power instruments.

Not all the region's crises are equal in importance to us:

- **Syria** and **Iraq** require direct, immediate political and military engagement; our objective must be the maintenance of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two nations. Sykes-Picot boundaries may not have been just but they have lasted 100 years and have general legitimacy. Erasing them will plunge the Levant into decades of civil strife. On the other hand, the domestic structures should be negotiated by Syrians and Iraqis which give security and economic promise to citizens and ethnic and sectarian communities. Nowhere are the practices and institutions of centralized national security states enshrined in holy writ.
- **Libya** needs American support of UN efforts to broker peace. In time, Libya will require outside, including American, help in building its security forces and institutions.
- **Egypt** needs and should receive external economic and political support to help it put its house in order; but it needs also to appreciate, if it is to secure that support, it

should demonstrate its intention to live by normal definitions of the rule of law, freedom of expression, and respect for human rights.

- Our **Gulf friends** need reassurance that the United States is their friend, ally, and guarantor of their security; at the same time they have their part to play in forging an architecture of security in the Gulf, reaching a modus vivendi with Iran and in lending their weight to efforts to secure peace in the Levant and elsewhere in the region.
- **Yemen's peace** is a cooperative undertaking, best pursued in combination with America's Gulf allies.

Designing and executing such strategies will be harder than at any moment in my lifetime and will take years. US-Arab relations are at their lowest ebb in decades. We are stuck with wars in Syria and Iraq, and supporting or subsidizing conflicts in Palestine and Yemen. Our ties to the Gulf are strained and we have yet to reach an equilibrium in our relationship with Iran. Our ties to Turkey, our longtime friend and ally in the region, are badly frayed.

We have lost our way in addressing the longest running crises in the region- the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. That conflict stokes resentment throughout the Arab World and fosters radical violence, as well as Iranian meddling. Our identification with Israel's claims and unstinting support of Israel fosters resentment because Israel's exclusive pursuit of its security to the exclusion of the rights of Palestinians is seen as deeply unjust. Israel's interference in our political life shames us.

The United States must remain committed to Israel's security. We were right to back Israel's quest for peace with Egypt and Jordan. We were right to help design a "two state" solution for Palestine. But the job does not end there. The Middle East's chaos gives Israel an historic opportunity to settle with the Palestinians and secure a place for itself in the region. No state or coalition of states threaten Israel. The 2002 Arab offer is the starting point in forging a settlement but and Israel's government has stubbornly failed to pick up the offer contained in it. We cannot protect Israel from the consequences of its own decisions and it has decided not to make peace on balanced terms. Peace cannot be made by unilateral action or imposed borders. Mark my words, a new Palestinian explosion is in the making. There will be others in the future.

The Obama Administration has time to spell out the principles on which a settlement can be negotiated and in so doing rally international support for a settlement and give its successor a roadmap to pursue.

Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sunni-Shi'ite divide

The United States enjoys no single relationship in the Arab world more important than that with Saudi Arabia. Our ties to that country were forged over decades, beginning in the Cold War. They rested on the foundations of predictable Saudi petroleum policies and close defense ties. Our intelligence service ties were second to none. We faced Iraqi aggression

together and for many years contained the excesses of Iranian power. We have cooperated closely in fighting terror. That said, the partnership is now in trouble.

Saudis react badly to criticism. They do not like to be reminded that their brand of Islam barely ever, if at all, tolerates other faiths; intolerance is an anathema to Americans. Wahabi doctrines and those of ISIS and al-Qaeda have much in common and Saudi citizens have supported (and even joined in) some of these radical causes. This shocks and offends Americans. It is difficult today to sublimate our differences as much as we have in common with the Kingdom. The way ahead calls for a frank recognition of our differences and a responsible discussion of those differences. We and the Saudi Kingdom have hard work to do in managing tensions in the Gulf, and finding peace for Syria and Iraq, but cooperation is essential.

Saudi Arabia seeks strong assurance we have its interests at heart and are prepared to act. It is traumatized by the memory of our attitude over Mubarak's fall and has lost faith in American assurances.

But Saudi Arabia and its friends in the GCC are not the only pillar on which American policy needs to be constructed. There is Iran. While we and the Islamic Republic have been deeply and often violently estranged since 1979. Just as the United States and Saudi Arabia have common interests, so have we with Iran. There can be no basis for security in the Gulf or in the region in the face of hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran. That enmity may express itself in religious terms- the Sunni-Shi'ite divide- but it is even more deeply rooted in clashing national interests. Saudi Arabia and Iran were not always "at daggers drawn;" their histories are equally marked by long periods of accommodation. Such is not possible today, given Iran's determination to provide for its security and the well-being of Shi'ite communities in the Middle East. And Saudi Arabia rightly sees the extension of Iran into the Sunni Arab world as a direct threat, which must be met, and rolled back before a new modus vivendi is reached.

Can outsiders, the United States included, help overcome the divide. Not soon. Perhaps in time there will be quiet, discreet ways to encourage the parties to meet and accommodate each other. There may be ways to exchange signals, point to priorities, consider outcomes, like regional security arrangements but in the case of the United States being able to help, we need better footing in Riyadh and Tehran.

The United States and Iran have more to do, if we are to reach this point. The JCPOA brought Iran's nuclear program back to internationally accepted rules. War was averted; diplomacy triumphed, a singular achievement for President Obama, John Kerry and American statesmanship. That agreement is working. It begins to open new doors for Iran's engagement in the world economy. It makes possible dialogue between the United States and Iran where we have common interests- Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf.

But first we and Iran must address the issues which divide us. They are many and they can be discussed. They include Iran's views about Israel; its support of Hizbollah and its use of terror, its development of missiles. The agenda included America's unilateral regime of sanctions against Iran.

Today, the fury of Republican opposition, coupled with Israel's objections and the Gulf's concerns about the direction of U.S relations with Iran have impeded our Administration's ability to pursue a fuller relationship with Iran. Step by step, the next American President will have to find a way forward- neither to favor Iran; nor to confer advantages on our Arab friends, but to achieve a new balance. No nation, specifically not Israel, should seek to impede that path. If reached, the interests of all will be advanced.

Syria and Iraq

Both are locked in the grip of civil wars. Neither can achieve peace and stability without political settlements. There can be no stable outcomes resulting solely from military force; especially when much of that force is wielded by outsiders. Iraq needs to find a political formula which will ensure the rights of, and security for, its Shi'ite majority and its Sunni and Kurdish minorities. Power sharing is the only way forward –a confederal arrangement negotiated by Iraqis, with a helping hand from outside. Once Iraq's Sunnis are secure, they can be detached from ISIS and it can be beaten. A military victory over ISIS alone will not suffice; without a political understanding, another radical insurrection is sure to follow.

Syria is similar but more complicated, given the multiplicity of actors and outside sponsors. Geneva negotiations are the only way forward and they are struggling with ceasefire arrangements which must be followed by an agreement to a transitional government, involving the regime and its non-radical opponents; a new constitution and a future dispensation which permits Syria's communities and ethnicities to share governance. The structure of the Syrian state and Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity must be preserved. Our strategy has to be the building and maintenance of an international coalition aimed at containing the Syrian conflict and then on bringing Syrians together to design a successor regime in which the interests of all parties are secure and radical Islam is exorcised.

Federalism within established borders is the one way the needs of communities in the Levant can be addressed. The success of such arrangements will depend on limiting the residual powers of central governments and good will from outside.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East is important to the US. The next Administration faces a deeply troubled region where our position has been compromised and will take years to rebuild. The region needs American involvement, ideas, resources, and commitment. It is in our interest to provide them, proceeding carefully, staying engaged, patiently so, defining our goals, making sure we can achieve them by matching our ambitions with our resources, eschewing the contrasting dangers of over-commitment of military force and withdrawal. The Middle East offers an opportunity to demonstrate our principles and at the same time, show we have the will and the power to defend those interests and the interests of the friends and allies, we need to secure this nation and ensure its prosperity in a very troubled world.