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Article 1.	The Washington Post <u>On Syria, Obama administration is leading to failure</u> Editorial
Article 2.	Los Angeles Times <u>Fate of Bashar Assad is key in Syria talks</u> Patrick J. McDonnell
Article 3.	Foreign Policy <u>Supporting America's Greatest Ally in Need: Jordan</u> Kori Schake
Article 4.	The Huffington Post <u>America Is Not in Decline, Its Foreign Policy Is... But It Can (Still) Surprise the World</u> András Simonyi and Erik Brattberg
Article 5.	The Washington Post <u>An emerging market problem</u> David Ignatius
Article 6.	The American Interest <u>Obama's Middle East Recessional Part 1: What</u>

	<u>Instability Really Looks Like</u>
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	Adam Garfinkle
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[Article 1.](#)

The Washington Post

On Syria, Obama administration is leading to failure

Editorial

January 22, 2014 -- THE OUTSIDE world seems to have grown numb to reports of atrocities from Syria — “barrel bombs” dropped on schools, Scud missiles aimed at apartment houses, blockaded neighborhoods where children die of starvation. But a report released Monday by a panel of international jurists ought to prick some consciences. Based on 55,000 images smuggled out of the country, mostly by a defector from the military police, it reports the murder of some 11,000 men detained by the Syrian government between 2011 and last August. Many of the bodies in the photographs show signs of torture; some are missing eyes. More than 40 percent of the bodies show signs of emaciation, indicating that the prisoners were systematically starved.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State John F. Kerry opened the Geneva 2 peace conference on Syria by referring to this

“horrific” account of “systematic torture and execution of thousands of prisoners.” He called it “an appalling assault, not only on human lives but on human dignity and on every standard by which the international community tries to organize itself.” The jurists, former war-crimes prosecutors commissioned by the government of Qatar, concluded that the “evidence would support findings of crimes against humanity against the current Syrian regime.”

Yet the diplomatic initiative that Mr. Kerry launched offers no means to hold the regime of Bashar al-Assad accountable for these atrocities, or even to stop them. On the contrary: It may serve to prop up the Assad government by treating it as a legitimate party to negotiations about Syria’s future. Mr. Kerry insists the talks will lead to a transitional government that excludes Mr. Assad, but the Syrian delegation flatly rejects this premise, and there is no indication that its allies Russia and Iran think otherwise.

Some diplomats at the conference, such as United Nations mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, believe it could lead to palliative measures, such as local cease-fires and the opening of humanitarian corridors to besieged civilians. Mr. Brahimi’s predecessor, Kofi Annan, was convinced of this as well and even obtained the Assad regime’s formal agreement to a plan. But the Assad forces never respected their commitments; now they are using offers of humanitarian supplies as a means to force the surrender of rebel-held areas.

President Obama demonstrated last year that the credible threat of force could change the regime’s behavior. His promise of airstrikes caused Mr. Assad to surrender an arsenal of chemical

weapons. Yet the president seems not to have learned the lesson of that episode. Now he makes the defeatist argument that, as he put it to David Remnick of the New Yorker, “It is very difficult to imagine a scenario in which our involvement in Syria would have led to a better outcome, short of us being willing to undertake an effort in size and scope similar to what we did in Iraq.”

In fact, Mr. Obama probably could force the measures Mr. Brahimi is seeking by presenting Mr. Assad with the choice of accepting them or enduring U.S. airstrikes. That he refuses to consider options between Mr. Kerry’s feckless diplomacy and an Iraq-style invasion only ensures that the Geneva 2 conference will fail and that the atrocities will continue.

Article 2.

Los Angeles Times

Fate of Bashar Assad is key in Syria talks

Patrick J. McDonnell

January 22, 2014 -- Montreux, Switzerland — At the core of the extraordinary diplomatic push launched Wednesday to end Syria's civil war is the fate of one man: Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Assad has steadfastly maintained power during nearly three years of war and hints he may run for reelection this year. But the Obama administration and the U.S.-backed opposition have said Assad must step down in any peace deal. That strategy may have backfired, contributing to a protracted conflict, a radicalization of the armed opposition and a consolidation of Assad's support.

While Assad is at the center of the debate about Syria, his future has significance far beyond the country's borders.

Syria is one of the key pieces of a delicate reordering of the political map of the Middle East. The conflict has become a proxy war in the regional conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims. The U.S. effort to end decades of estrangement with Shiite Iran, starting with an interim deal to limit its nuclear program, has further angered longtime ally Saudi Arabia, Iran's Sunni archrival. The monarchy already was upset that Washington has not been more aggressive against Assad, Tehran's longtime ally.

Few expect the peace negotiations, which move to Geneva on Friday for face-to-face meetings between the government and the opposition, to reach a swift resolution.

Washington appeared to be doubling down on the demand that Assad must go.

The "only thing standing" in the way of a political solution is "the stubborn clinging to power of one man, one family," Secretary of State John F. Kerry told the conference, adding: "One man and those who have supported him can no longer hold an entire nation and a region hostage."

Assad, who was not at the conference, showed no sign of backing down.

Syrian officials and their Russian allies have indicated flexibility on a number of issues, including possible cease-fires, prisoner exchanges and bolstered humanitarian access to besieged areas. But Damascus says Assad's future is nonnegotiable.

"Syrians alone have the right to choose their government, their parliament and their constitution," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem told diplomats who had come to Montreux from more than 30 nations, most seemingly hostile to Assad. "Everything else is just talk and has no significance."

Moallem said any deal brokered in Geneva is subject to a national referendum. Assad seems confident he could win an election — though balloting would be of questionable legitimacy amid a civil war.

During the war, the radicalization of the opposition, including the growth of Al Qaeda and other militant Islamic elements, has bolstered Assad's support in some quarters. That is especially the case among Christians and other minorities and among many secular-minded Syrians appalled at the prospect of an Islamist takeover.

Assad stands atop a dynastic power structure more than four decades in the making, set in place by former President Hafez Assad, the current leader's late father. In the 1980s, the elder Assad oversaw the military crushing of an Islamist uprising viewed by his son as an earlier incarnation of the current revolt. Bashar Assad is also the standard-bearer of Syria's Alawite minority, many of whose members view the revolt led by the

Sunni Muslim majority as a matter of survival.

U.S. officials are keen to avoid both direct military involvement in a potential quagmire and a complete collapse of Syria. Diplomats fear the kind of chaos that followed the U.S.-led ouster of Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq in 2003.

Syria's major allies, Russia and Iran, have asserted that they are not tied to propping up Assad's rule. But many Western diplomats are skeptical. Syria is Russia's last major strategic bastion in the Middle East. And, for Tehran, Assad's Syria is a central component of its "axis of resistance" partnership with Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based political and military group.

President Obama stated publicly in August 2011 that Assad should step down from office. Expectations in Washington and other global capitals that Assad's trajectory would mirror the relatively quick exits of Egyptian and Tunisian strongmen caught in "Arab Spring" uprisings were off base. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian military backed Assad and carried out his crackdown on dissent.

Despite its oft-stated antipathy toward Assad, Washington has also shown a willingness to work with his government when necessary. The deal reached last year to avert U.S. airstrikes was contingent on Assad's willingness to renounce his chemical weapons stockpiles under international supervision.

Some observers, notably Ryan Crocker, a former U.S. ambassador to a number of Mideast and South Asian countries, have said that Assad is unlikely to fall and it would be wise for Washington to engage his government as an alternative to Islamic radicals. But Kerry's comments in Montreux indicate

that the Obama administration remains intent on Assad's departure.

Kerry regularly cites the "Geneva communique," a kind of peace road map hammered out in June 2012 during a United Nations-organized summit.

But the document does not explicitly call for Assad's ouster. The transitional administration "could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent," the communique states.

Syria says it is committed to implementing the terms of the Geneva communique "as a package, without singling out" any specific terms, Bashar Jaafari, Syria's delegate to the United Nations, told reporters Wednesday.

In Damascus' view, it is Washington and its allies who are violating the spirit of Geneva by focusing on one aspect — the removal of Assad — that the accord did not explicitly call for. With Moscow backing Syria's interpretation of the Geneva communique, the barrier to forcing Assad's ouster would seem a formidable one.

Kerry hinted Wednesday that the U.S. was considering other measures, including enhanced aid to the opposition, in case the Geneva II process faltered. But he provided no further details about "parallel" efforts.

"It's up to all of us to do our best to try to make sure that Geneva and/or one of the parallel tracks works," Kerry told reporters late in the day. "And I'm not going to talk about the possibilities of it

not finding some road forward."

Article 3.

Foreign Policy

Supporting America's Greatest Ally in Need: Jordan

Kori Schake

January 22, 2014 -- Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman wrote on Jan. 20 that "the most important emerging theme in world politics is America's slow retreat from its role as global policeman."

He cites numerous examples of countries reconsidering their options now that the United States is unwilling to be drawn into crises; among those countries Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which are made deeply insecure by America's choices in their neighborhood. Neither country considered Saddam Hussein's Iraq the main security problem in the region; both had encouraged the United States to focus on Iran instead. Both countries were alarmed at the colossal mismanagement of the Iraq war by George W. Bush's administration and the consignment of it to the dumpster by Barack Obama's administration. Both countries believe that America's choices about Iraq, democratization in the Middle East, and Syria have assisted Iran in attaining its regional aspirations of influence for

itself and destabilization of governments in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf. Both countries complain that the United States has no strategy for the region, making its policies impossible for allies to synchronize with and easy for enemies to take advantage of. Both are terrified -- especially after the red-line debacle with Syria -- that a dangerous gap exists between Obama's declaratory policy that the United States will prevent, by force if necessary, Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and his willingness to carry out that policy. And they are justified in that fear.

The inability of the U.S. government to understand that it cannot successfully compartmentalize policy toward countries and issues in the Middle East (and elsewhere) is where the problem begins. The president may boldly say that he doesn't bluff, but the Iranian government believes it just watched his bluff get called on Syria. And this cannot but affect the Iranian government's judgments about his willingness to hold to his red line on Iran's nuclear program. That reaction would be further reinforced by the White House marketing its interim Iran deal as "the only alternative to war, and the American people don't want another war in the Middle East." America is undercutting its friends and emboldening its enemies by such actions. And given the gale-force dangers whipping around the Middle East right now, the country ought to be doing an awful lot more to help its friends cope with difficulty and create opportunity.

The ally of America in the greatest need at the moment is Jordan. The kingdom is teetering precariously under the weight of external events while navigating political reforms. The government of Jordan has been better than most in its support for American interests in the Middle East: recognizing Israel,

training Syrian rebel forces in conjunction with Saudi Arabia when the United States wanted it done but was too squeamish to undertake it, offering its territory and assistance in training Iraqi counterterrorism forces. King Abdullah II was the first head of state to call for Syria's Bashar al-Assad to step down. He has included the Muslim Brotherhood in the political opening he is seeking to usher into being in Jordan, taking a much more moderate line than the Saudis or revanchist Egyptian government. But the government of Jordan rightly fears Assad remaining in power, and it rightly fears an Islamist government coming to power by force in Syria that could threaten Jordan outright, complicate Jordan's domestic political reforms, drain the limited resources of the government, and jeopardize a foreign policy that has been extraordinarily beneficial to American interests.

The Jordanians have been generous to Syrians fleeing into their country, taking in 600,000 -- making refugees now 10 percent of the country's population. The magnitude of comparison would be the United States taking in 31 million refugees; in actuality, the United States has admitted fewer than 100. The Zaatari camp with 100,000 refugees is Jordan's fifth-largest city; half its inhabitants are under 18. And 40 percent of Jordanians live along the border with Syria, meaning that refugee camps abut areas already heavily populated and refugees are straining social services designed for local needs. Moreover, 80 percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan aren't living in refugee camps, but have taken up residence in cities and towns, which further increases the strain on local services and the difficulty of providing international aid to the refugees. To its credit, the government of Jordan has allowed Syrian refugees to register for

school and provides them free health care. It also allows them to work even though Jordanians are enduring 16 percent unemployment.

Jordan is a country still coming to terms politically and culturally with the permanence of Palestinian refugees who came to their country two generations ago. Syrian refugees are unlikely to leave for years, even if the civil war in Syria burns out: There will simply not be enough social trust to justify the risk for many refugees. As the CEO of the NGO Mercy Corps emphasizes, "Host communities bear an unsustainable burden as hundreds of thousands of refugees compete for scarce jobs, resources, and services. We need to deliver aid in a way that tackles these and other long-term issues." Add to that helping manage the potential destabilizing effects of Syrians organizing politically as a force in Jordanian politics and possible Islamist infiltration, both of which pose long-term risks for Jordan's polity.

The United States has been forthcoming in providing material assistance, principally through fast-acting military accounts but also in contributing to the UNHCR effort and facilitating work of private organizations like Mercy Corps that carry out so much of U.S. foreign assistance. The United States is the largest international donor to Syrian refugee efforts. But a much larger and more diversified inflow of aid to Jordan is urgently needed and long overdue. The United Nations provisionally estimates that the cost to Jordan of hosting Syrian refugees will be \$3.2 billion in 2014. The United States needn't be the provider of that aid, but drumming it up from others is something it can and should do.

And here is where the Obama administration could perhaps make a virtue out of the catastrophe that is its Middle East policy, harnessing the newfound willingness of unlikely partners in the region to productive effect. The U.S. government should develop a strategy for raising not just that \$3.2 billion but also providing political, economic, and other assistance to the government of Jordan, webbing it into regional cooperation made possible by allies worried about U.S. policies. The approach should expand from the refugees themselves to also having lines of operations for affecting Jordan's own people and also supporting the government of Jordan.

It should increase trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Jordanian efforts on water sharing and security, folding other regional allies in to fund and share Jordan's burdens. Jordan should also be given a starring role in Palestinian peace talks, both to reward its support for Israel but also to help in managing its domestic Palestinian population -- if a peace deal is reached, Jordan will be a major beneficiary.

It should incorporate contributions from all the Gulf states (some of which pledged help to Jordan before, some now, as part of their inner-GCC struggle for power), not just for refugee relief but also for development projects that reward Jordan's openness to those refugees and its political engagement with the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (Qatar is especially well placed to moderate the Brotherhood's demands) and tribes (here perhaps Saudi Arabia could be relied upon). It will be a delicate balance to prevent Jordan from becoming the next battleground for the pro- and anti-Brotherhood forces in Egypt and the Gulf, but that contest is already taking shape within Jordan. What is needed is active political engagement that supports the

government of Jordan rather than those actors at the government's expense.

Such an approach need not overturn or be a major diversion from the initiatives Obama is committed to: a deal with Iran and progress on peace between Israel and Palestine. It need not reconsider flawed policies that exacerbated many of these problems, such as the writing off of Iraq or America's erratic support for democratic movements. But a Middle East policy built around shoring up Jordan and then other countries that are making the right kinds of domestic and international choices would go a long way in giving America's allies in the region a higher degree of confidence that the United States isn't turning its back on them. It could begin rebuilding their belief that the United States can be relied on. And the cost of stabilizing Jordan is nowhere near the cost we will pay if King Abdullah II is unable to hold the country steady and maintain its current policies.

Kori N. Schake is a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

[Article 4.](#)

The Huffington Post

America Is Not in Decline, Its Foreign Policy Is... But It Can (Still) Surprise the

World

András Simonyi and Erik Brattberg

January/22/2014 -- These days the talk of the town is Bob Gates's gripping memoir *Duty* about his time serving as Secretary of Defense under two presidents: George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Bob Gates was respected by America's friends, allies and its enemies alike. To be on the safe side, we must start with a confession: the authors are fans of the former secretary. Unlike us, most Europeans had no idea whether Bob Gates was a Republican or a Democrat. And frankly it did not and does not matter. Most commentaries focus on what Mr. Gates had to tell about Obama and Biden and other U.S. leaders, including former Secretary of State Clinton. All juicy stuff, fun reading, but with little long-term, lasting significance.

In contrast, the most important parts of the book are the ones explaining the polarized nature of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and how and why this makes America weaker. This has a strong message for the future, beyond America. What Bob Gates is talking about is exactly what worries America's allies and friends right now. It should worry Americans too.

As Gates makes vividly clear, page after page, Washington's foreign policy process is broken and dysfunctional, big time. Contrary to the often extreme and divisive positions on Fox News or MSNBC (clearly part of the problem, except for Morning Joe: we kind of like that show!), according to Gates, the current paralysis is not the fault of one party or the

other. America's foreign and security policy used to be bipartisan. Today, only the blame is bipartisan.

It used to be that "politics stopped at the waters edge" -- when it came to foreign policy. It used to be that Washington's foreign policy elite could famously simply gather in cigar-smoke filled clubrooms to sketch out a bipartisan foreign policy. It used to be that Tom Lantos, a leading democrat, and Bob Dole, a leading conservative, would travel the world together as best friends. They would explain to their counterparts how different their views were on most things, except for one: no one should count on their differences when it came to America's overall foreign policy objectives.

After World War II, leaders from both political families came together around a hugely ambitious plan to offer security and economic prosperity to war-ridden Western European countries, better known as NATO and the Marshall Plan. Throughout the Cold War, there was little doubt where Democrats and Republicans stood on the issue of the liberation of Eastern Europe. These were great moments of America's leadership of the free world. It was possible because of visionary leaders, and broad political support at home. And most importantly, it was possible because of a broad consensus among Democrats and Republicans.

Whether a bipartisan consensus of such mythical proportions ever existed in reality or not is beside the point. That was the world's perception and it made America stronger. Respected and emulated, at times loathed and even despised, but never considered hesitant on the fundamental values of freedom and democracy, because there used to be one America. It is different

today.

Here is why all this is really important, and why we worry.

In a rapidly changing world where China will soon surpass the United States as the world's largest economy, with authoritarian regimes such as Russia on the rise and when the West seems to have lost its way, U.S. global leadership is once again called for. When America fails to lead, the world becomes messy, at times even dangerous. Washington therefore needs a broader, more strategic, more determined and clearly more courageous vision of its global role. It needs to send a strong message to the rest of the world. This will only be possible when true bipartisanship, a willingness to work together in the best American tradition, is back.

After a decade of fighting unwinnable wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, Americans have become war weary. But they must see that it is in their own best interest that America remains engaged globally. Make no mistake: American "declinism" is a myth -- surely one should not fall for the silly comparison between America and the Roman Empire. However, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is up to Americans, its leaders, its president and Congress to decide whether the 21st century will be another "American century" or whether it will be dominated by others; nations who do not share our deep beliefs in human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

We do understand the tectonic social (generational and ethnic) changes that have taken place in America, the enormous impact of technology, and the role of social media. All this should make America more courageous, not less -- more determined to lead,

not less. But only if Democrats and Republicans will all come together in that weathered, battered, but still so important consensus. While Democrats and Republicans may disagree on the specifics, the broad objectives of foreign policy must be equally shared and equally tirelessly pursued no matter what.

America can still surprise the world. You can do it! Just take the lead from your Duty, á la Bob Gates.

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[Article 5.](#)

The Washington Post

An emerging market problem

David Ignatius

A funny thing happened on the way to the decline of the United States and the rise of China, Brazil and other emerging markets: Many prominent analysts began wondering if the pessimistic predictions about America were wrong — and whether it was the emerging markets that were heading for trouble.

These international economic fads are always suspect, up or down. They seem to follow what I was (facetiously) told years ago was the guiding rule for columnists: Simplify, then exaggerate. So beware this latest revisionism, just like any other variety.

But some startling new assessments of global economic trends stand the “declinist” wisdom of recent years on its head. The revisionists argue that U.S. economic fundamentals are now stronger than they seemed, and that those of the BRICs — the emerging giants Brazil, Russia, India and China — are weaker.

Certainly, the financial markets are registering this new view. The Morgan Stanley Emerging Markets Index fell 5 percent last year, compared to a nearly 30 percent gain for the U.S. benchmark Standard & Poor’s 500 index. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted Tuesday that economic growth will rise this year and next in the United States and decline both years in China.

One influential revisionist has been Antoine van Agtmael, the economist who coined the hopeful term “emerging markets” in 1981. Van Agtmael has written several blistering assessments recently about the former rising superstars.

“A few years ago there was a widespread feeling that the developed world had fallen off its pedestal — that Asia had not only escaped the global financial crisis but that its system was somehow superior. That overconfidence seems gone now. Instead there is a sense of vulnerability,” he wrote in Foreign Policy in June 2012. “[T]he despair and fear felt by many in the United States is misplaced. In fact, there are early signs that the

United States may be regaining some of its lost competitiveness in manufacturing and that China is losing some ground.”

The reversal of expectations was summarized last month in a report by Goldman Sachs titled “Emerging Markets: As the Tide Goes Out.” The authors warned that economic difficulties in China, Brazil, Russia, Turkey and other investment darlings aren’t just cyclical but require “a significant reassessment of emerging market countries” and an expectation of “underperformance and heightened volatility over the next 5 to 10 years.”

China is the bellwether, and here the Goldman Sachs report echoed themes cited by China’s own leaders: the country’s unbalanced growth; its demographic decline, with fewer young workers resulting in higher labor costs; its potentially deadly pollution problems; and its financial weaknesses. This last theme was highlighted in a December report by China’s Academy of Social Sciences, which noted that local-government debt reached the “alarming level” of about \$3.3 trillion by the end of 2012, double what it was in 2010.

This municipal credit bubble poses a delicate dilemma for Chinese leaders: The country’s growth is slowing, with the IMF projecting that it will fall from 7.7 percent last year to 7.5 percent in 2014 and 7.3 percent in 2015. As the rate of growth shrinks (especially compared to its double-digit expansion of a decade ago), there’s a danger the local-debt balloon will pop, with significant social and political repercussions.

Brazil is another “economic miracle” that’s getting a skeptical new look. The Goldman Sachs report cites the country’s

problems of high taxes, costly and distorting government subsidies and low labor productivity. Financial markets have taken note, with Brazilian equities, currency and local debt all falling by double digits last year.

One surprising new problem economy is Turkey, another stellar performer over the past decade. Because of its heavy external debt, estimated at about 45 percent of its gross domestic product, “Turkey is one of the economies most vulnerable to a shift in sentiment away from emerging markets,” noted Goldman Sachs. Turkey has new domestic political strains, too, as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Superman of a few years ago, copes with a domestic corruption scandal and the fracturing of his Islamist political base. Some analysts predict Erdogan will face a challenge from Turkey’s popular President Abdullah Gul.

As global competitors stumble, the United States has been picking up speed. Remarkable new shale oil and gas discoveries have reduced America’s energy vulnerability and made it a relatively low-cost manufacturing nation. It was a telling example of the new mood that the Wall Street Journal titled an article last year about van Agtmael and other revisionists: “Is the U.S. the Next Hot Emerging Market?”

Article 6.

The American Interest

Obama's Middle East Recessional Part 1: What Instability Really Looks Like

Adam Garfinkle

January 21, 2014 -- Imagine trying to follow a critical baseball or football game—a World Series finale or a Superbowl, say—without being able to see it in person or even on TV, without knowing which players are in the lineups at any given time, and without even having access to a real-time eyewitness play-by-play over the radio or the internet. All you have to go on is delayed second- and third-party accounts whose unbiased reliability cannot be firmly established, and, worse, whose motive to obfuscate or “spin” the facts has to be assumed. That’s a little like what trying to follow U.S. foreign policy feels like right now, U.S. Mideast policy in particular. Things are happening even amid some internal debate and disagreement. Assessments and decisions are being made, and those judgments, large and small, are bearing consequences. But for those who aren’t calling the pitches and flashing the signs to hitters and base-runners, and who can’t even follow the game in real time, it’s frustrating trying to figure out what’s going on because what we do know of the decision-making process could conceivably fit into more than one explanatory template.

The sports metaphor is obviously a limited one. U.S. foreign policy is not a game. No score can be expressed in numbers that makes any sense. There are more than two teams. Lineups are neither symmetrical nor fixed. Offense and defense are not sharply distinguished. The competition doesn’t ever exactly end. The rules are diffuse. There are no umpires, aside, perhaps, from the unrelenting logic of strategic interaction. But you still get the basic idea: Important stuff is going down, but we on the outside

can only infer what it is. And this is a “big game.”

Unprecedented instability in the Middle East, whatever else it’s doing, is teeing up an unprecedented number of generative decision points for U.S. officials, creating path-dependent realities we’ll be living with for decades. These are molten times, so the demands to “get it right” now reach incandescent levels of intensity (or they should).

We know most of the discrete decision points: What to do about the Syrian civil war? How best to stop or limit the Iranian military-nuclear program? What to do about a re-fracturing Iraq? How to stop the contagion from Syria and Iraq from spreading into Jordan and Lebanon? How to handle the critical Turkish angle viz Syria and Iraq and the Kurds amid a new and potentially far-reaching Turkish political crisis? How far and in which ways and with what relative priority to push Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations? How to influence post-“Arab Spring” political developments in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain and elsewhere? How to think about the burgeoning sectarian cleavages in the region and relate it specific countries? How the counter-proliferation portfolio relates to the other challenges in the region? How to refashion the U.S counterterror intelligence footprint given the withdrawal of so many platforms and personnel from Iraq and, prospectively, Afghanistan?

What is striking about these decision points is how many of them there are right now, and how diverse, difficult and intertwined they tend to be. This is not normal. That observation in turn leads to other questions: Does the Obama Administration have a strategic theory of the case as regards the region as a whole that can tie all of these discrete points together in some overarching logical framework? And is that theory of the Middle

Eastern case, if it exists, consciously related to global strategic objectives of some sort? If it does and if it is, whose theory is it? The President's? The Secretary of State's? Someone else's? Are the principals agreed or not—on some of it, most of it, all of it?

This is not a simple set of questions because different Presidents and principals have demonstrably different styles of relating strategic abstractions to policy behavior. Some do have explicit theories of the case and exert themselves consistently to match behavior to strategy. The Nixon-Kissinger tenure was the quintessence of such an approach, but, tutored by World War and disciplined by Cold War, the Eisenhower and Kennedy-Johnson Administrations approximated it.

Some Administrations have had highly abstract, often thickly moralist theories of the case, but these theories have been too abstract to marshal consistent discipline in a policy process. They often leave subordinates to guess and argue over what the President wants. That circumstance typified both the Reagan and George W. Bush presidencies, and to some extent the Carter presidency as well.

Some Presidents and their closest advisers have deeply practiced intuitions about policy, but are not so keen on formal strategy exercises or explicit strategies. The Bush-Scowcroft-Baker team exemplified this approach, as did the Truman-Acheson team. A President can have a disposition toward strategy without having a formal strategy as such. A President can have a disposition toward strategy without having a formal strategy as such, and in very fluid times that may be most he can have, or should want. This is possible because when discrete decisions come before the President, there are not a large number of choices he can

make by the time they get there. His instincts can cause those decision points to cluster a certain way even if he cannot fully or consistently articulate why he has decided as he has in a fashion that would satisfy a Kissinger, a Brzezinski, an Acheson or even a Scowcroft.

Some Presidents seem to have no use for strategy at all, are not adept or comfortable thinking in such terms, and so tend to deal with unavoidable foreign policy decision points on a case-by-case basis. The Clinton-Christopher period illustrates this approach.

And Barack Obama? Is this Administration's foreign policy just distracted ad hocery, as many claim, as some evidence from the process side suggests? Or, agree with it or not, does it have, as others claim, an explicit strategic theory of the case that embraces the world and the Middle East as a part of it? Or, like the George H.W. Bush Administration, does the Obama Administration have highly intelligent (or highly misguided) instincts that fall short of explicit, formal strategy, but that are nevertheless driving policy in a particular direction over time? Which is it? How do we know? What counts as evidence?

In the following several posts, I will attempt to answer these questions. But before an answer can make much sense we need first to understand more about the novelty of a thoroughly destabilized Middle East, and how it got that way. Then we will look briefly at some of the aforementioned discrete Middle Eastern decision points (Syria, Iran and Iraq) in hopes that a characteristic pattern of Obama Administration decision-making emerges from them. Then, maybe, we'll be able to accurately characterize the Obama Administration's approach, putting us in

a position to make some judgments about how wise it is, and what it's likely to lead to. Onwards!

Over the past seventy or so years a kind of intellectual tic developed among casual Western observers of the "Middle East" that has held the region to be "unstable." (I put Middle East in scare quotes to suggest that said casual observers have been casual, too, about defining the region they mean.) Well, like a lot of things, a region is stable or unstable only by comparison to some place else, or the same place at different times. Hence, how one defines the area one is talking about obviously affects comparisons.

So, if said casual Western observers have meant by "Middle East" just the "Arab-Israeli" conflict zone alone (and they often have), then wars in 1948-49, 1956, 1967, 1970-71, 1973, 1982 and so on, "peacetime" periods speckled by acts of terrorism, reprisals, raiding, assassinations and the like, probably qualify that area as highly unstable compared to Europe, South America, and most of Asia during the Cold War. If observers meant the Levant or the Gulf or North Africa or more broadly the "Arab world", or even more broadly the "Muslim world", the instability label fit a lot less snugly. Yes, there were palace coups and assassinations and military interventions into politics and a few insurgencies, civil wars and other incidents of mass political violence within countries in all of these defined zones. But there was really only one bona fide interstate war that did not involve Israel, and none that pitted Arab states directly against one another.

There were also some very long-lived, highly stable regimes: Qaddafi in Libya from September 1969 to October 2011; the

Assads in Syria from November 1970 to date; Mubarak in Egypt from October 1981 to February 2012; the Ba'ath in Iraq, mostly under Saddam Hussein, from July 1968 until March 2003, and one could go on. Of course cemeteries are stable, too, so stability is not always a good thing, as most of us imagine, to healthy civil societies. But I am using “stability” in a descriptive, social science sense—no more, no less.

You can get some idea of how relatively stable the Middle East has been for most of the past 60-70 years, dating to just before the end of 2010, by comparing it to what's going on now. Now the region as a whole—all of it, pretty much, however you define it—is unstable. Really unstable. It could get even worse and probably will, but this, folks, is what instability looks like—this is the real deal. This is an entire region engaged in the political equivalent of a demolition derby. This is an entire region engaged in the political equivalent of a demolition derby, except that no one seems to be having any fun.

Consider: There are no conventional cross-border wars going on right now, but we've got just about everything else wherewith to make an instability cocktail. Civil wars and active major insurgencies? Check: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Somalia (the latter two if you include non-Arab countries). Political violence just short of institutionalized insurgencies? Check: Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Lebanon and, arguably, Algeria. Merely frightened or weak governments to one degree or another? Check: Jordan, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Sudan and both Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Ordinarily well-institutionalized governments in political crisis, and not in control of their entire national territory? Check: Turkey. The only two major countries in the

region (I'm excluding three Gulf families or collections of families with flags: Oman, Qatar and the UAE) that are in control of their national territory and are not in their own estimation teetering on the brink of some internal meltdown are Iran and Israel. And long before the rest of the region convalesces those two may go to war.

Moreover, as many observers have pointed out, we're not looking just at some two dozen countries in trouble, we're looking at more than a few whose very existence as polities is in jeopardy. That certainly goes for Syria, and it probably goes for Iraq. The existence of an integral Libya, Lebanon, Yemen and Sudan very long into the future is no sure bet either. The prospect of regime upheaval (not government administration change but actual regime change, properly defined) against the monarchies in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco is far from zero. The rise of pan-Kurdish nationalism has implications for the territorial configurations of Iran and Turkey as well as of Iraq and Syria. "Palestine", less than a polity but more than a figment of political imagination, has long been in limbo and, current negotiations notwithstanding, is likely to remain there for quite a while. So we're not just talking about the sum of individual country troubles, we're talking about an entire regional state subsystem undulating and disintegrating from the decay of some of its units and the growing weakness and unpredictability of other units.

One good tic deserves another, I suppose. Just as casual Western observers used to be quick to disparage the Middle East's instability, they were and remain determined to blame someone for it. The American mainstream press operates biographically: who's up, who's down; who's screwed up and who hasn't (yet).

This saves journalists and editors from having to actually understand issues, and, besides, they're probably right to think that most of their readers prefer it that way. High-brow gossip trumps actual analysis, in spades.

The result of this habit is that, depending on their politics mostly, some blame President Obama for the Middle Eastern mess we behold today. He should, they archly declare, have intervened early in Syria. He should have supported the Iranian Green Revolution in 2009. He should have stood by Mubarak, even as Mubarak's own colleagues were throwing him over the side. And had he done all this and a nearly endless list of other things he should have done but did not do, or that he did do but should not have done, everything would be fine today.

Others prefer to blame George W. Bush and the neocons. It was the Iraq War that caused all of this. I'm not kidding; there's a short essay called "What the War in Iraq Wrought" in the New Yorker, dated January 15, by a journalist named John Lee Anderson that blames everything wrong in the region, even by implication what's happening in Egypt, on the Iraq War because that's what supposedly created the sectarian demon loosed on the Middle East today.

Some are more ecumenical in their revisionism: The United States caused all the trouble, all the administrations dating back as far as anyone can remember them. Or it's the British, or the French, or the generic West, or the Russians, or (of course, lest we forget) the Jews. It rarely seems to occur that the peoples of the region might just bear some responsibility for their own situation. And it virtually never occurs that looking for someone to blame is perhaps not the best way to go about understanding

regional realities.

It is especially annoying when people who really ought to know better do such things, doubly so when they do it in mea culpa mode. I was stunned when I heard President Bush say in 2003, “For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy the Middle East, and we achieved neither”, a statement that Condoleezza Rice repeated often while Secretary of State (which inclination, more than anything else, led me away from her service). In other words, the reason that Arab countries were not democracies, and hence produced terrorists, is not because of thousands of years of their own historical and cultural experiences, but because of U.S. foreign policy decisions over the previous six decades. This is the argument that leftwing critics of U.S. support for authoritarian regimes in a Cold War context used to make; for avowedly conservative Republicans to start making it was truly breathtaking, not least because, no matter who makes it, it is absurd.

We did too achieve stability for those 60 years; by any reasonable measure, U.S. Cold War-era Middle East policy was a success. U.S. Cold War-era Middle East policy was a success. Far more important and to the point, it was never in our power in any case to turn Arab states into democracies. This is something George W. Bush (I hope) has by now learned the hard way, and Dr. Rice too. It is astounding that even when we criticize ourselves we do it with a dollop of hubris larger than Mt. McKinley: It’s always all about us. Except that it isn’t. The United States is not and never has been the determining factor in everything that goes on in the Middle East, or anywhere else abroad for that matter (except maybe Panama for a time). We

need to get over ourselves.

That doesn't mean, of course, that what Presidents decide is totally without effect. For good or ill, the United States does matter some most of the time, and a lot at least some of the time. The Iraq War turned out to be ill-advised, certainly the way it was fought if not the decision itself. The way we decided to operate in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime amounted to another mistake, though it's taken more time for that mistake to become clear to most observers. Screwing up these two wars has amounted to a strategic defeat for the United States in the wider region, and every U.S. ally and partner has suffered from this defeat accordingly, just as all U.S. adversaries and competitors have gained to one degree or another.

The Obama Administration inherited this defeat, decided to cut U.S. loses, and we'll see later if by doing so it has made things worse or not. Certainly the oscillation between crusading interventionism and the subsequent American recessional under Obama has had its own disorienting impact. As to the broader implications of recent U.S. policies, the Iraq War did stoke the coals of sectarian division into a fire, but it did not create them. The recrudescence of Sunni-Shi'a violence goes back proximately to 1973-74, the year that the quadrupling of oil prices both set the stage for the collapse of the Pahlavi regime in Iran and bankrolled Saudi wahhabism, setting up a collision to come between extremist Sunni and Shi'a clerics (not that sectarian conflict in Islam is exclusively theological in nature, anymore than the 16th century Wars of the Reformation were). Had the Obama Administration early on and effectively quashed the Syrian situation, it might have earned a delay in the region's sectarian clash—but probably no more than that, since the

demon had already broken its chains earlier in Iraq and had already made deadly visitations as far away as Pakistan.

Factors inherent to the region explain most of what is happening now. With few exceptions, the Arab states are weak relative to their tribal societies and sectarian identities. These weak states, most of which are heterogeneous ethnically or in sectarian terms, have been unable to devise effective loyalty formulae or achieve strong records of economic growth or social justice over the years. Many have been bitten hard by the resource curse. The strongly patriarchal, authoritarian bias of these societies has hindered adaptation to many aspects of modernity, not least their ability to create open market economies in place of the radical elite-rentier distortions that have characterized every single one of the Arab countries, republic and monarchy alike, from the beginning of the independence era.

For all these deficiencies the Arab state elites have preferred to blame the West, the United States and especially Israel, and the only thing more bizarre than this is the credulity of so many Westerners in believing them. Sure, the artificiality of many of the territorial states created in the wake of World War I has not helped, but it's not been the only or the main impediment in most cases so many decades later, and it's certainly not something anyone can reasonably blame on President Bush, President Obama or the United States in general.

Suffice it to say, messes like the ones we see today in the Middle East have lots of causes, some remote, some more proximate. They are hard to disentangle, and even harder to communicate to people who, frankly, don't care to know if it gets in the way of their blame game, which some pursue because it's politically

useful and others pursue because they really just don't know any better. Look, you can lead a political partisan to knowledge but you can't make him think.

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