Time for a reset

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The past six years have wrought upon the Middle East its greatest upheavals in a century. These upheavals, at first hopefully described in the West as the “Arab Spring,” have now turned into an endless autumn of instability and atrocities. Against this background, today’s meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump will be a historic one.

For this meeting may replace the stagnation and fatigue that have characterized policy decisions in recent years, with a reset of strategic thinking about the Middle East.

Four main characteristics make the current upheavals unprecedented: Dramatic weakening of most Arab states, in several cases leading to actual disintegration, like in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

Propaganda of terrorism, as the number of individuals and groups engaging in terrorism, and most importantly the geographic size of the areas they control, are proliferating exponentially.

What may seem to be unconnected local conflicts are in fact a multi-front regional Sunni-Shi’ite war. This war already includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, is spreading to additional countries like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States and is set to continue for a very long time.

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Clearly then, the old order of the Middle East has collapsed, but to date, all attempts by the US and others have not only failed to restore stability, but seem to be actually making things worse.

Why is that? Simply put, as you cannot make an egg out of an omelet, so the efforts to put back the old order after it has broken down are bound to fail.
The attempts to restore the centralist states and the old borders of Syria or Iraq cannot succeed. Most Arab countries created after WWI were to begin with wholly artificial constructs, held together only by repressive, brutal regimes. The battles of the past few years have now divided these countries along the real ethnic or religious lines on the ground.

Moreover, since having been rehabilitated by its nuclear deal with the US, Iran has ironically been treated as a partner for building regional stability.

But in truth Iran has used the temporary nuclear freeze to free itself of sanctions, while remaining the main instigator of conflict in countries like Syria, Iraq and Yemen, as well as a principal sponsor of regional and international terrorism.

The mostly passive regional approach adopted by the US under the Obama administration (with the exception of the Iran deal), means that it has let others lead the way.

Now Washington has discovered that this approach has hurt America’s only trustworthy allies in the region. The Europeans are leading the relentless pressure on Israel to set up another failed Arab state on its borders, an additional source of terrorism and instability. Turkey is ruthlessly harassing the Kurds, the only force consistently fighting against Islamic State.

Any chance to bring about a measure of stability and hope for a better regional future has to start with a completely different approach, a strategic reset, based on three principles.

First, as already indicated, Iran is the principal source of regional instability, and the leading exporter of radical Islamist politics. The deal orchestrated by the Obama administration froze (but did not dismantle) Iran’s nuclear program, saved its economy and has left Tehran free to pursue its goal of establishing itself as the leading regional power. A completely new approach should be adopted by the US toward Iran, curtailing Iranian influence in Damascus and Baghdad, breaking up the Iranian terrorist network and imposing heavy sanctions on the regime until it reverses course or collapses.

Secondly, instead of trying to forcibly recreate the centralist states and old borders of Syria or Iraq a realistic solution should be sought, to prevent more years of bloodshed. The alternative is the stabilization of these countries along the ethnic-religious lines corresponding more or less to the current situation on the ground, with the creation of safe zones that allow the return of refugees to areas of similar ethnic and religious composition. The long-term goal should be turning the de facto division in Syria and Iraq into either a new loose confederative system, or formal partitioning into smaller independent states.

Third, the US should adopt a policy of supporting its allies instead of pressuring them to make concessions.

This support does not necessarily entail direct American intervention in the region. In fact the strongest US allies are those willing and able to battle the common enemies on their own, and they ask America only to back them in these battles. Instead of the current European obsession with the Palestinian issue, America should back Israel and other regional players in combating Iranian influence as well as in the wider efforts against terrorism.

Instead of following the Turkish obsession with obstructing any form of Kurdish self-rule, America should support the Kurdish efforts to create their own independent state in the Kurdish areas of
Iraq and Syria. The Kurds have shown themselves to be loyal allies to the US, and a Kurdish state would swiftly become, alongside Israel, a bulwark for American interests in the region.

A policy of support for Israel and the Kurds, besides its direct benefits would also send out a strong regional message that it is in America’s long-term interest to have a Middle East where societies that are more open politically and economically can cooperate with the US in defending common interests. The natural candidates for such policies are regional minorities, like Christians, Alawites, Druse and others, who are by definition inimical to radical Islam. Meanwhile, those who fight against the US, most of all Iran, must learn that actions against America have dire consequences.

Such a reset would define simple and coherent goals for a regional strategy that would greatly benefit the US and Israel, while also bringing greater stability and hope to the whole region.

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