

The middle of nowhere

by Edward Luttwak

Western analysts are forever bleating about the strategic importance of the middle east. But despite its oil, this backward region is less relevant than ever, and it would be better for everyone if the rest of the world learned to ignore it

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Why are middle east experts so unfailingly wrong? The lesson of history is that men never learn from history, but middle east experts, like the rest of us, should at least learn from their past mistakes. Instead, they just keep repeating them.

The first mistake is "five minutes to midnight" catastrophism. The late King Hussein of Jordan was the undisputed master of this genre. Wearing his gravest aspect, he would warn us that with patience finally exhausted the Arab-Israeli conflict was about to explode, that all past conflicts would be dwarfed by what was about to happen unless, unless... And then came the remedy--usually something rather tame when compared with the immense catastrophe predicted, such as resuming this or that stalled negotiation, or getting an American envoy to the scene to make the usual promises to the Palestinians and apply the usual pressures on Israel. We read versions of the standard King Hussein speech in countless newspaper columns, hear identical invocations in the grindingly repetitive radio and television appearances of the usual middle east experts, and are now faced with Hussein's son Abdullah periodically repeating his father's speech almost verbatim.

What actually happens at each of these "moments of truth"--and we may be approaching another one--is nothing much; only the same old cyclical conflict which always restarts when peace is about to break out, and always dampens down when the violence becomes intense enough. The ease of filming and reporting out of safe and comfortable Israeli hotels inflates the media coverage of every minor affray. But humanitarians should note that the dead from Jewish-Palestinian fighting since 1921 amount to fewer than 100,000--about as many as are killed in a season of conflict in Darfur.

Strategically, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been almost irrelevant since the end of the cold war. And as for the impact of the conflict on oil prices, it was powerful in 1973 when the Saudis declared embargoes and cut production, but that was the first and last time that the "oil weapon" was wielded. For decades now, the largest Arab oil producers have publicly foresworn any linkage between politics and pricing, and an embargo would be a disaster for their oil-revenue dependent economies. In any case, the relationship between turmoil in the middle east and oil prices is far from straightforward. As Philip Auerswald recently noted in the *American Interest*, between 1981 and 1999--a period when a fundamentalist regime consolidated power in Iran, Iran and Iraq fought an eight-year war within view of oil and gas installations, the Gulf war came and went and the first Palestinian intifada raged--oil prices, adjusted for inflation, actually fell. And global dependence on middle eastern oil is declining: today the region produces under 30 per cent of the world's crude oil, compared to almost 40 per cent in 1974-75. In

2005 17 per cent of American oil imports came from the Gulf, compared to 28 per cent in 1975, and President Bush used his 2006 state of the union address to announce his intention of cutting US oil imports from the middle east by three quarters by 2025.

Yes, it would be nice if Israelis and Palestinians could settle their differences, but it would do little or nothing to calm the other conflicts in the middle east from Algeria to Iraq, or to stop Muslim-Hindu violence in Kashmir, Muslim-Christian violence in Indonesia and the Philippines, Muslim-Buddhist violence in Thailand, Muslim-animist violence in Sudan, Muslim-Igbo violence in Nigeria, Muslim-Muscovite violence in Chechnya, or the different varieties of inter-Muslim violence between traditionalists and Islamists, and between Sunnis and Shia, nor would it assuage the perfectly understandable hostility of convinced Islamists towards the transgressive west that relentlessly invades their minds, and sometimes their countries.

Arab-Israeli catastrophism is wrong twice over, first because the conflict is contained within rather narrow boundaries, and second because the Levant is just not that important any more.

The second repeated mistake is the Mussolini syndrome. Contemporary documents prove beyond any doubt what is now hard to credit: serious people, including British and French military chiefs, accepted Mussolini's claims to great power status because they believed that he had serious armed forces at his command. His army divisions, battleships and air squadrons were dutifully counted to assess Italian military power, making some allowance for their lack of the most modern weapons but not for their more fundamental refusal to fight in earnest. Having conceded Ethiopia to win over Mussolini, only to lose him to Hitler as soon as the fighting started, the British discovered that the Italian forces quickly crumbled in combat. It could not be otherwise, because most Italian soldiers were unwilling conscripts from the one-mule peasantry of the south or the almost equally miserable sharecropping villages of the north.

Exactly the same mistake keeps being made by the fraternity of middle east experts. They persistently attribute real military strength to backward societies whose populations can sustain excellent insurgencies but not modern military forces.

In the 1960s, it was Nasser's Egypt that was mistaken for a real military power just because it had received many aircraft, tanks and guns from the Soviet Union, and had many army divisions and air squadrons. In May 1967, on the eve of war, many agreed with the prediction of Field Marshal Montgomery, then revisiting the El Alamein battlefield, that the Egyptians would defeat the Israelis forthwith; even the more cautious never anticipated that the former would be utterly defeated by the latter in just a few days. In 1973, with much more drama, it still took only three weeks to reach the same outcome.

In 1990 it was the turn of Iraq to be hugely overestimated as a military power. Saddam Hussein had more equipment than Nasser ever accumulated, and could boast of having defeated much more populous Iran after eight years of war. In the months before the Gulf war, there was much anxious speculation about the size of the Iraqi army--again, the divisions and regiments were dutifully counted as if they were German divisions on the eve of D-day, with a separate count of the "elite" Republican Guards, not to mention the "super-elite" Special Republican Guards--and it was feared that Iraq's bombproof aircraft shelters and deep bunkers would survive any air attack.

That much of this was believed at some level we know from the magnitude of the coalition armies that were laboriously assembled, including 575,000 US troops, 43,000 British, 14,663 French and 4,500 Canadian, and which incidentally constituted the sacrilegious infidel presence on Arabian soil that set off Osama bin Laden on his quest for revenge. In the event, two weeks of precision bombing were enough to paralyse Saddam's entire war machine, which scarcely tried to resist the ponderous ground offensive when it came. At no point did the Iraqi air force try to fight, and all those tanks that were painstakingly counted served mostly for target practice. A real army would have continued to resist for weeks or months in the dug-in positions in Kuwait, even without air cover, but Saddam's army was the usual middle eastern façade without fighting substance.

Now the Mussolini syndrome is at work over Iran. All the symptoms are present, including tabulated lists of Iran's warships, despite the fact that most are over 30 years old; of combat aircraft, many of which (F-4s, Mirages, F-5s, F-14s) have not flown in years for lack of spare parts; and of divisions and brigades that are so only in name. There are awed descriptions of the Pasdaran revolutionary guards, inevitably described as "elite," who do indeed strut around as if they have won many a war, but who have actually fought only one--against Iraq, which they lost. As for Iran's claim to have defeated Israel by Hizbullah proxy in last year's affray, the publicity was excellent but the substance went the other way, with roughly 25 per cent of the best-trained men dead, which explains the tomb-like silence and immobility of the once rumbustious Hizbullah ever since the ceasefire.

Then there is the new light cavalry of Iranian terrorism that is invoked to frighten us if all else fails. The usual middle east experts now explain that if we annoy the ayatollahs, they will unleash terrorists who will devastate our lives, even though 30 years of "death to America" invocations and vast sums spent on maintaining a special international terrorism department have produced only one major bombing in Saudi Arabia, in 1996, and two in the most permissive environment of Buenos Aires, in 1992 and 1994, along with some assassinations of exiles in Europe.

It is true enough that if Iran's nuclear installations are bombed in some overnight raid, there is likely to be some retaliation, but we live in fortunate times in which we have only the irritant of terrorism instead of world wars to worry about--and Iran's added contribution is not likely to leave much of an impression. There may be good reasons for not attacking Iran's nuclear sites--including the very slow and uncertain progress of its uranium enrichment effort--but its ability to strike back is not one of them. Even the seemingly fragile tanker traffic down the Gulf and through the straits of Hormuz is not as vulnerable as it seems--Iran and Iraq have both tried to attack it many times without much success, and this time the US navy stands ready to destroy any airstrip or jetty from which attacks are launched.

As for the claim that the "Iranians" are united in patriotic support for the nuclear programme, no such nationality even exists. Out of Iran's population of 70m or so, 51 per cent are ethnically Persian, 24 per cent are Turks ("Azeris" is the regime's term), with other minorities comprising the remaining quarter. Many of Iran's 16-17m Turks are in revolt against Persian cultural imperialism; its 5-6m Kurds have started a serious insurgency; the Arab minority detonates bombs in Ahvaz; and Baluch tribesmen attack gendarmes and revolutionary guards. If some 40 per cent of the British population were engaged in separatist struggles of varying intensity, nobody would claim that it was firmly united around the London government. On top of this, many of the Persian majority oppose the theocratic regime, either because they have become post-Islamic in reaction to its many prohibitions, or because they are Sufis, whom the regime now persecutes almost as much as the small Baha'i minority. So let us have no more reports from Tehran stressing the country's national unity. Persian nationalism is a minority

position in a country where half the population is not even Persian. In our times, multinational states either decentralise or break up more or less violently; Iran is not decentralising, so its future seems highly predictable, while in the present not much cohesion under attack is to be expected.

The third and greatest error repeated by middle east experts of all persuasions, by Arabophiles and Arabophobes alike, by Turcologists and by Iranists, is also the simplest to define. It is the very odd belief that these ancient nations are highly malleable. Hardliners keep suggesting that with a bit of well-aimed violence ("the Arabs only understand force") compliance will be obtained. But what happens every time is an increase in hostility; defeat is followed not by collaboration, but by sullen non-cooperation and active resistance too. It is not hard to defeat Arab countries, but it is mostly useless. Violence can work to destroy dangerous weapons but not to induce desired changes in behaviour.

Softliners make exactly the same mistake in reverse. They keep arguing that if only this or that concession were made, if only their policies were followed through to the end and respect shown, or simulated, hostility would cease and a warm Mediterranean amity would emerge. Yet even the most thinly qualified of middle east experts must know that Islam, as with any other civilisation, comprehends the sum total of human life, and that unlike some others it promises superiority in all things for its believers, so that the scientific and technological and cultural backwardness of the lands of Islam generates a constantly renewed sense of humiliation and of civilisational defeat. That fully explains the ubiquity of Muslim violence, and reveals the futility of the palliatives urged by the softliners.

The operational mistake that middle east experts keep making is the failure to recognise that backward societies must be left alone, as the French now wisely leave Corsica to its own devices, as the Italians quietly learned to do in Sicily, once they recognised that maxi-trials merely handed over control to a newer and smarter mafia of doctors and lawyers. With neither invasions nor friendly engagements, the peoples of the middle east should finally be allowed to have their own history--the one thing that middle east experts of all stripes seem determined to deny them.

That brings us to the mistake that the rest of us make. We devote far too much attention to the middle east, a mostly stagnant region where almost nothing is created in science or the arts--excluding Israel, per capita patent production of countries in the middle east is one fifth that of sub-Saharan Africa. The people of the middle east (only about five per cent of the world's population) are remarkably unproductive, with a high proportion not in the labour force at all. Not many of us would care to work if we were citizens of Abu Dhabi, with lots of oil money for very few citizens. But Saudi Arabia's 27m inhabitants also live largely off the oil revenues that trickle down to them, leaving most of the work to foreign technicians and labourers: even with high oil prices, Saudi Arabia's annual per capita income, at \$14,000, is only about half that of oil-free Israel.

Saudi Arabia has a good excuse, for it was a land of oasis hand-farmers and Bedouin pastoralists who cannot be expected to become captains of industry in a mere 50 years. Much more striking is the oil parasitism of once much more accomplished Iran. It exports only 2.5m barrels a day as compared to Saudi Arabia's 8m, yet oil still accounts for 80 per cent of Iran's exports because its agriculture and industry have become so unproductive.

The middle east was once the world's most advanced region, but these days its biggest industries are extravagant consumption and the venting of resentment. According to the UN's 2004 Arab human development report, the region boasts the second lowest adult literacy rate in the world (after sub-Saharan Africa) at just 63 per cent. Its dependence on oil means that manufactured goods account for just 17 per cent of exports, compared to a global average of 78 per cent. Moreover, despite its oil wealth, the entire middle east generated under 4 per cent of global GDP in 2006--less than Germany.

Unless compelled by immediate danger, we should therefore focus on the old and new lands of creation in Europe and America, in India and east Asia--places where hard-working populations are looking ahead instead of dreaming of the past.

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