

The Search for an Elusive Peace in the Middle East¹

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Some men see things as they are and say why?
I dream things that never were and say, why not?
—George Bernard Shaw

Iraq since 2008 (some say 2003) and Syria since 2011 have degenerated into overlapping wars that have destabilized the Middle East, cost thousands of civilian casualties, and created thousands of refugees. Although now apparently in retreat, ISIS (or ISIL or Daesh) has inspired terror attacks in the United States, Europe, and Australia. Among the so-called “great powers,” The United States and Russia are involved albeit in different degrees to different purposes. For the United States, the two most important goals in the Middle East seem to be stabilization based largely on elimination of ISIS in a way that will reduce the likelihood of successor groups emerging with similar goals and tactics² and eliminating or at least slowing Iran’s progress toward missile-deliverable nuclear weapons.

However, many Americans thinking the 2003 invasion of Iraq was only about WMDs rather than all 23 reasons given in the Congressional authorization, regard the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a mistake and want simply to pull all troops out regardless of the consequences. Further weakening the U.S., its national debt now equals or exceeds GDP, widely regarded as the tipping point for financial stability. The U.S. no longer is the world’s single dominant power, part of a world with states such as Brazil, China, India, and Iran now or soon able to match it at least regionally. Aggressive non-state actors, international organizations such as the United Nations, multinational corporations and NGOs discovering new ways to assert influence further complicate the international situation.

Russia has responded aggressively on several fronts based on Vladimir Putin’s apparent belief that Russia is being denied the regional and global influence it deserves. Since coming to power, he has turned to hard-edged nationalism and bellicose rhetoric, initiated a major rearmament program, created an Arctic Command, revised war fighting doctrine to integrate conventional, nuclear and “hybrid” tactics including cyberattacks, extended Russian territory into Crimea and parts of Ukraine, improved relations with Turkey, and prevented the extension of NATO into Ukraine and Georgia. Further indicators are joint military exercises with China, suspicion of widespread hacking, occasional disruptions of civil aviation and buzzing of NATO warships and planes, and escalated submarine patrols that some believe threatens a resumption of the Cold War. The main objective appears to be to weaken Western democratic institutions and alliances (Aron, 2017). Sanctions are unlikely to change Mr. Putin’s strategy and may drive it in even more risky directions. All this points to difficulties in developing a peaceful relationship with Russia despite his leaving the door open to cooperation on a few fronts such as antiterrorism, arms control, and nuclear nonproliferation.

On the other hand, Russia has lost the East European satellites that provided defense in depth and faces terrorism, insurgencies, and serious demographic problems. Oil and gas prices have fallen and with it the economic growth of recent years. Its aggression in Ukraine has provoked economic sanctions that have further reduced economic growth. Russia’s two immediate goals seem to be re-establishing its Soviet-era international influence and eliminating economic sanctions.

¹Written while on a Fulbright at the Nobel Peace Institute, Oslo, Norway in Spring 2017.

²There are at least 55 other distinct Muslim terror groups, 20 pledged to ISIS, several more sympathetic to ISIS, and many of the rest associated with al-Qaeda (Neumann, 2016), although the numbers change frequently.

In these circumstances, might there be sufficient common Russian and United States interests for the two to find mutual advantage in working together to stabilize Syria and Iraq in a way that other nations would find acceptable and perhaps even join—in other words, “to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance” as Kissinger (1979 page 54) once put it? Behind this notion potential mutual gains and improved relationships that are at the heart of successful diplomacy. This may not be as far-fetched as it might seem at first.

Russian thinkers have suggested a “Concert of Nations”³ apparently aimed at reducing commercial competition and distributing power more widely by bringing in non-western powers. Thus, “the powerful and responsible powers should unite and form an organization on a par with the UN, a controlling body which will sometimes impose definite standards of conduct on the world community.” The Russian proposal is designed to trump the UN and the Security Council, which the Russians see as reflecting an outdated view of the world as it existed in 1945 rather than the very different one we live in today (Allison 2013).

Further Russian sympathy for the idea is suggested by a paper on the “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation” that makes clear that Russian officials were thinking in terms of restoration of their influence as early as 1993. With respect to the Middle East, “Russia’s attitude toward the region is determined primarily by its geostrategic and geopolitical significance...The stabilization of the situation in the Middle East is among Russia’s first priority interests...Russia must continue to occupy a decisive and principled position in regard to any cases of destabilization (FSIB USR 25 March 1993 37 quoted in Allison 2013).”

Gorbachev’s “New Thinking” for which some sympathy seems to remain, rejected force to maintain control of Eastern Europe, supported at least some U.N. mandated peacekeeping, subordinated the Marxist emphasis on class struggle to human rights, rebuked the Brezhnev Doctrine, and sought to join the western “community of Nations.” Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov speaking at the U.N. in 2002 proposed transforming the anti-terror coalition into a broader, cooperative security system.

Similar ideas have come from the West. One such formulation is Barnett’s (2004) observation that the numerous overseas U.S. military operations (contingency positioning, combat, evacuations, peacekeeping, disaster relief, or show of force) have largely been to countries whose common denominator is relatively high isolation from the global economy. In his view, similarly isolated countries divide the world into a non-integrated “Gap” and a functioning “Core.” Countries of the Core live for the most part by agreed rules, are economically interdependent, and no longer resolve disputes by war. Gap countries are characterized by poor communications and transportation, lack of foreign investment, low life expectancy, lack of education, repression especially of women, lawlessness, and war characterize the countries in the Gap. Many depend on export of one or two raw materials for foreign exchange. Some are theocracies, others are kleptocracies, and some are both. Their rulers are above the law and removable only by coup or death.⁴

Barnett’s formulation implies six policy choices. The radical fringe advocates a retreat from globalization into some sort of anarchic primitive utopia. The far left holds the Core, in their view no more than evil former slavers and colonizers, responsible for conditions in the Gap and advocates withdrawal of military forces, atonement through foreign aid and reparations, and treating Gap states as responsible international actors, which many are not. The mainstream left advocates joint action through the UN and defense of all possible targets at home, but no expansion of police powers to enable achievement of an essentially impossible purpose. The mainstream right advocates selective short interventions to eliminate bad actors if they pose wider threats. Some in the mainstream right and left concur that peace building is desirable through state building, while others looking at actual interventions since 1990 question the feasibility of the approach—more on that below.

³Inspired of course by the post-Napoleonic system adopted at the Congress of Vienna by the major European nations to maintain their power in the face of revolutionary movements, and maintain the existing balance of power. It provided a means for managing disputes through negotiations among the major powers until it broke down over time with economic, political and technological change, as the EU may be doing now.

⁴The Core includes Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, all of North America, India, China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand, and all of Europe except Russia and the Balkans. The Gap includes western and northern South America, Central America, much of the Caribbean, all of Africa except South Africa, Russia and the Balkans, all of the Middle East, the “stans” of Central Asia, North Korea, and all of Southeast Asia except Singapore.

The libertarian right blames the Gap for its own problems and advocates isolationism, leaving aggressive powers to expand into the resulting vacuum and destroy any hope for a peaceful and prosperous world. Saving the best for last, the sixth choice is to “enlarge the Core by shrinking the Gap.” This long-term task provides a broad vision of peaceful states integrated into a global economy that could guide foreign policy decisions in much the same way “containment” did during the Cold War.

Might these immediate and long-term visions provide a point of departure for Russia and the United States to cooperate in reducing conflict in Iraq and Syria in ways that would induce other nations with interests in a stable Middle East to join the effort? It is not difficult to see advantages for Middle Eastern countries, particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, in joining such an effort. It is similarly easy to see advantage for Europe in a more stable Middle East no longer generating massive numbers of refugees and occasional terror attacks. But, trying to solve all the problems at once almost certainly is hopeless and beyond existing will and resources. Is there a more restricted area for a more feasible approach?

Start by considering a simplified model based on just two major goals each for the U.S. and Russia. Those for the U.S. might very well be ending the nuclear threat from Iran and eliminating ISIS in a fashion to discourage similar actors emerging. Those for Russia might be restoration of what it feels is its rightful place in world affairs particularly with respect to its influence in the “Near Abroad” and elimination of sanctions in response to their actions in Ukraine (Aron, 2017). There are 2⁴ or 16 possible strategies formed by all possible combinations of those goals. Eliminating those that provide no reason for a Russia-U.S. agreement to work together leaves twelve possible strategies (including doing nothing) summarized in Figure 1.

U.S. Preference Vector	H	C	K	I	F	B	D	E	G	A
Restore Russian international influence	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Eliminate sanctions	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Eliminate ISIS and stabilize Iraq/Syria	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
End Iranian nuclear threat	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0

Russian Preference Vector	D	B	C	K	I	H	G	E	F	A
Restore Russian international influence	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
Eliminate sanctions	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
Eliminate ISIS and stabilize Iraq/Syria	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
End Iranian nuclear threat	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Figure 1 U.S. and Russian Preference Vectors

For convenience, each combination is given an alphabetic label. The selection of a goal is indicated by 1, while 0 indicates one not taken. Reading vertically, each set of four 0s and 1s indicates a possible strategy. They appear in preference order from left to right for each country as I assess the preferences at this point in time. For instance, Mr. Putin’s aggressiveness suggests that he values Russian influence more than improving the economy but if Mr. Gorbachev still were running things, eliminating sanctions might be more important to Russia. Unsurprisingly, the preference order differs for the United States and Russia, for instance strategy H being the first choice for the U.S. but only the sixth for Russia. Of course, each goal leaves lots of details and subsidiary issues to be settled.

Fraser and Hipel proposed a method for identifying feasible and stable policies in circumstances such as the one presented above. The method begins by identifying unstable outcomes they term “unilateral improvements,” those strategies from which a country can unilaterally move without provoking a negative reaction because the opposing country would regard the move as a concession or an improvement. They are identified by inspecting the preference vector for each country separately for strategies that appear to the left of the one under consideration on its own preference vector, *and* do not appear to the right of it on the opponent’s preference vector.

The possibilities are listed for each country from top to bottom in preferential order for that country. The remaining strategies are likely to prove stable if pursued. This method has been presented in simplified form so that its main features are apparent. It can be extended to multi-party, multi-issue disputes including ones involving coalitions, unknown options, and incorrect or misleading information, and useful additional analyses are possible. The only requirement is the ability to rank possibilities in preference order. However, as the number of parties and issues multiply, the analysis becomes more complex at an exponential rate, and soon requires a computer to do the work. Interested individuals in pursuing this course are referred to the original (Fraser and Hipel, 1984) for a detailed explanation of both the method and underlying theory.

If U.S. and Russian representatives seized the opportunity to cooperate in the Middle East, based on the preceding analysis we would expect the U.S. to propose strategy H, and Russia to propose strategy D. Negotiations are likely to coalesce around strategy C, eliminating economic sanctions directed at Russia and stabilization of Iraq and Syria, which minimally requires ending the civil war in Syria and eliminating ISIS in a manner that discourages copycat organizations. Just how might this be accomplished?

Strategically, NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia outflanks Russia. It is understandable that Russia sees this as threatening, just as the United States sees European intervention in the Caribbean as threatening, hence the Monroe Doctrine. While the takeover of Crimea, whose population is highly sympathetic to Russia, probably is irreversible, it should be possible to trade terminating NATO efforts to extend membership to both in exchange for Russian agreement to respect their independence, and on that basis to end sanctions against Russia. Details could be arranged to further the objective of integrating Russia into the economic, legal, and other norms of the EU and moving it further from its aggressive, one might almost say paranoid, foreign policy, which is why this strategy is likely to be attractive to the West and has such a high rating among U.S. preferences. Even if not specifically an intended consequence of the agreement, over time it has some potential for Russia of achieving its other goal, expansion of its international influence, this time on a more positive note than its current path.

The campaign against ISIS seems to be progressing, albeit incredibly slowly and as of mid-2017 seems to be expanding into Syria despite Russian threats to shoot down planes and drones flying west of the Euphrates. Destroying ISIS in a way that dissuades other from terror groups picking up its mantle and stabilizing Syria and Iraq at the same time is a formidable task that builds on established tactics for fighting guerrillas and other irregular fighters, and on the lessons learned since the end of the Cold War.⁵ ISIS, more nearly conquerors than irregular fighters embedded in a society, must not simply be defeated militarily. It is an old idea going back to at least T. E. Lawrence in Arabia and Field Marshal Walter Templer fighting the insurgency in Malaya that “the shooting side of the business is only 25 percent...the other 75 percent lies in getting the people behind us.” In the current context, that means dissuading potential foreign fighters, many of them having come from Western Europe and North Africa. Or, as Pinker (2012) put it, “the failure of democracy to take hold in many African and Islamic states is a reminder that a change in the norm of surrounding violence has to precede a change in the nuts and bolts of governance.” The more idealized the vision of Islam the easier it should be for a knowledgeable Muslim to convince him to abandon Salafism. (Neumann, Owens).

⁵ Such as Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, East Timor, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kosovo, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Namibia, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia.

U.S. Preference Vector	H	C	K	I	F	B	D	E	G	A
Restore Russian international influence	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Eliminate sanctions	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Eliminate ISIS and stabilize Iraq/Syria	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
End Iranian nuclear threat	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Possible unilateral improvements			C	C				H	H	H
				K				C	C	C
								K	K	K
								I	I	I
								B	B	F
								D	D	B
									E	D
										E
										F
Russian Preference Vector	D	B	C	K	I	H	G	E	F	A
Restore Russian international influence	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
Eliminate sanctions	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
Eliminate ISIS and stabilize Iraq/Syria	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
End Iranian nuclear threat	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
Possible unilateral improvements				C	C		D	D	C	D
					K		B	B	K	B
							C	C	I	C
							K	K	H	K
							I	I		I
							H	H		H
										G
										E
										F
										A

Figure 2 Analyses of U.S. and Russian Preference Vectors

International interventions in the 1990s often were based on the assumption that state-building was necessary and sufficient for peace-building. That in turn was thought to require provision of basic services (justice, personal security, public education and transportation) which in turn required establishing non-corrupt public finances, introducing free markets to rebuild economies, and democratizing governments to promote responsibility and undermine authoritarianism. (Call and Doyle and Sambanis).

In practice, the requirements for building both a stable and peaceful state often proved mutually contradictory. A focus on security without attention to inclusiveness and accountability can foster human rights abuses. Eliminating corruption and selecting officials strictly on merit often conflicted with the need to share power across factors such as ethnicity, religion or tribe if the state was to be viewed by all as legitimate. Getting essential services restored rapidly by contracting them to multinational corporations frequently conflicted with the need to build local capacity and markets. A strong, stable state can easily become totalitarian. Free elections and free markets are not enough (Chandler, Lederach). Sustainability required institutions that citizens—not foreigners—viewed as legitimate—but that state did not have to be a Western-style democracy. Compounding the problems, the peacekeepers were not committed to staying long enough for improvements to take hold—a matter of years if the post WWII experience in Japan and Germany which had much more stable institutions to begin with are any guide and the situation was much less intricate than that faced today.

Conclusion

The times they are a-changing. International order premised solely on the Westphalian tradition of respect for state sovereignty no longer is sufficient given failed and failing states, non-state terrorists with and without state support, and the possibility of non-attributable biological, chemical, cyber, and nuclear attacks and the emergence of space as a theater of war. If some of what goes on inside a country threatens other countries or even its own population, under the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that has been emerging since WWII, such states no longer are considered exempt from international response. In 2005 the U.N. resolved that “Each individual state has the responsibility to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.” It declared the international community responsible for “collective action” “in a timely and decisive manner,” although implementation remains problematic. The idealistic goals for peace building of the 1990s can be replaced by more pragmatic ones aimed less at transforming the world into liberal democratic free market states than at building stable states that will prove sustainable and less aggressive. Despite the difficulties, state building appears essential but not sufficient to peace building.

Local legitimacy and the need to engage with rather than simply replace community leaders are now recognized as more important than the cultural imperialism of imposing Western ways. The limits on intervenor resources and will compared with the large number of conflict situations are better understood, suggesting focusing on those situations most threatening to global peace—such as the current wars in Syria and Iraq.

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