

Europe and America / Europe vs. America: Alliance Politics in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Although the current campaign against terrorism is just unfolding, America has actually been in the middle of a new "World War" of sorts for some time. In order to understand this war, one must answer three crucial questions: 1) With whom is the United States at war? 2) Why is America at war with these particular adversaries? 3) How should the United States conduct this war, both at home and abroad?

Regarding the first question, America's longstanding adversaries include at least three major movements in the Middle East. First are the militant Shi'is, who declared war on the United States as early as 1979. Second is the fascist Iraqi Ba'ath party. Saddam Husayn believes that the Gulf War never ended, as he continues to violate its ceasefire terms with respect to weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles. Third, America is at war with the militant Sunnis, probably dating from 1995.

Why is America at war with these movements? Essentially, the United States has no other choice but to defend itself and its values. America cannot wait for its current adversaries to show a change of heart. Americans have a clear sense of national identity and are willing to use force to defend it. This explains why America and Europe often find themselves on different tracks in the face of conflict. Europeans live in a post-national mode, and many are quite uncertain about their identities. They are reluctant to use force, hence the gap between America and Europe in the campaign against terror and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

America is also at war because of its involvement in the Middle East over the last quarter century. Al-Qaeda, the Ba'athists, and the Shi'is have long opposed this involvement, and all three movements have been encouraged by America's passive response to their violent activities in recent decades -- a response largely limited to investigation and litigation. Now, however, it is time for the United States to put a stop to such activities before another attack on the order of September 11 occurs.

How should the United States fight this war? Washington must devise an overall strategy, both domestic and foreign, that will last for the next few decades. One crucial aspect of this strategy is energy. America cannot continue to depend on the Middle East, which controls two-thirds of the world's oil reserves. Moreover, the United States must consider creating an institution that deals with domestic intelligence, analogous to Britain's MI5. As far as European-American cooperation is concerned, strategy should guide the formation of alliances, not the other way around. Unfortunately, the Europeans are hiding their heads in the sand at the moment. Only the British seem to comprehend the need for allied action in this war. Washington must convince the Europeans to enhance their military power if they are to be of substantial help in this major conflict. America fought World War I for Wilson's "fourteen points," World War II for the Atlantic Charter, and the Cold War for the freedom of those oppressed by communism. Today, America must convince the pathological predators and the autocrats of the Middle East to be wary of a U.S. response.

JOSEF JOFFE

Mediation in the Middle East

Mediation in the Middle East has a long and troubled history. It was successful only during the 1978 Camp David conclave. Why did the 2000 Camp David summit fail where the 1978 summit succeeded? The most critical difference is that in the 1978 meetings, Israeli prime minister Menahem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat wanted to be forced into a deal. They represented two strong states in conflict over a piece of barren land, the Sinai Peninsula. The Israelis got what they craved: not real peace, but nonbelligerency, not so much "land for peace" as "Sinai for strategic advantage." Yet, none of these conditions obtains in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is why mediation has proven futile so far.

First, the issue is not just land, but also legitimacy and exclusive possession. For the Israelis, the existential threat has been compounded by Arafat's insistence on a Palestinian "right of return." The conflict, then, is about much more than a flag and a passport for the Palestinians. The Palestinians dream about redefining Israeli sovereignty by way of demography. The Israelis support a Palestinian state in principle but in effect want to limit its sovereignty. All Israeli governments have insisted on an enduring right of supervision over the future Palestinian state's armament and air space.

What, then, can others do to mediate? In Israel, the UN is seen as biased in favor of the Palestinians and the Arabs in general. This perception reduces the UN to a bystander, albeit one that may prove useful as an active facilitator after a peace deal is reached. The European Union (EU) is not as tainted in Israeli eyes, yet Europe has routinely defined "evenhandedness" as "pro-Palestinian neutrality." Only German foreign minister Josef Fischer has credibility in both Gaza/Ramallah and Jerusalem, the latter because he softened the blow of resolutions and demarches that were critical of Israel. Credibility is not enough, however. Mediators must be stronger than either party to the conflict, and must ensure mutual security above all, especially in such an existential clash. Unfortunately, the EU cannot deal with the existential issue.

Can Arab countries mediate in this conflict? Which states would want to serve that role? Certainly not Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam, nor Syria, which is beholden to the dynastic dictatorship of the Assads. Jordan is too weak to make the first move, though it has boldly maintained its own 1994 peace deal with Israel. That leaves Saudi Arabia and Egypt, both of which are, at best, ambivalent.

If anybody can turn this impossible trick, then, it is the "hyperpower," as the French like to call the United States. America's advantages are threefold. First, it has credibility. Second, it has ample resources for cajoling both sides with material and symbolic benefits. Third, it has the clout to perform the most critical task of all: guaranteeing the security of both Israel and Palestine.

Yet, as the dismal failure of Camp David II and Taba showed, even these three assets are not enough. The conflict has to be ripe for resolution. Exhaustion, not victory, will define this moment for both sides; the point at which dreams are shattered, illusions are lost, and ambitions are blunted. Only at this point will the United States be able to wade in with a realistic chance of success. Once security is guaranteed, there will be more room for cooperation between America and Europe; in particular, the Europeans could help to build a successful democracy in Palestine. Moreover, Arab countries would have to offer at least benevolent neutrality to both Israel and Palestine. Stating the issue in these terms may diminish hopes for rapid resolution. Yet, if a true resolution is to take hold -- i.e., a viable Palestinian state and an Israel that is accepted by most of its neighbors in the long term -- then containment of the conflict is the duty of moderators here and now.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Merissa Khurma.

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