The Middle East – America's Hotel California

. . .
There were voices down the corridor
I thought I heard them say
"Welcome to the Hotel California
. . .
"We are all just prisoners here
Of our own device"
. . .
Last thing I remember, I was
Running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
"Relax," said the night man
"We are programmed to receive
You can check out any time you like
But you can never leave"

– "Hotel California" by The Eagles (emphasis added)[1]

On 7 October 2023 Hamas attacked Israel with thousands of fighters who broke through the barriers separating the Gaza Strip from Israel and ravaged numerous communities killing more than a thousand, wounding thousands more, and then taking more than two hundred hostages back to the Gaza Strip. Almost immediately a cry went up for Palestinian rights as protestors in many Western cities expressed moral outrage for the plight of the Palestinians and called for an end of the Israeli occupation. For weeks following that fateful day news reporters, analysts, and pundits gave opinions, explanations, and projected possible events while most viewers wanted to know why it happened or why the demonstrations were happening. What follows is an attempt to provide an answer to those questions.

In short, this is an attempt to describe the creation and change of the narrative space landscape associated with the Israel-Palestine conflict as well as that of the greater Middle East.

What was lost in the heat of the 7 October related events was that on 5 October 2023 there was the first intra-NATO shootdown of an aircraft as an American F-16 shot down a Turkish drone over Syrian airspace. The drone was part of a Turkish attack on Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq in retaliation for a Kurdistan Workers Party suicide attack in Ankara on 1 October 2023.[2] On 19 September 2023 Azerbaijan captured the province of Nagorno-Karabakh after decades of struggle, disagreement, and conflict.[3] Prior to the Hamas attack there looked to be a possible agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the state of Israel. Prior to that there was a seemingly successful mediation by China to heal some of the recent strife between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. A week before Hamas launched its attacks, the national security advisor to the president of the United States stated that "The Middle East region Is quieter today than it has been in two decades."[4] Contrary to that expression, 2023 was a very busy year for the Middle East. Will there be a sea change in regional power dynamics and which great power will have the most influence in the years to come? What will regional changes mean

[1] Don Felder, Don Henley, and Glenn Frey, "Hotel California," *Hotel California* (Eagles Album), Asylum, 1976.

[2] Natasha Bertrand and Oren Liebermann, "US fighter jet downs a drone belonging to NATO ally Turkey over Syria, officials say," *CNN* [5 October 2023]. https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/05/politics/us-downs-turkey-drone-syria/index.html.

[3] The Associated Press, "Azerbaijan moves to reaffirm control of Nagorno-Karabakh as the Armenian exodus slows," *NPR* [2 October 2023]. https://www.npr.org/2023/10/02/1203150145/azerbaijan-moves-to-reaffirm-control-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-the-armenian-exodus-.

[4] Gal Beckerman, "'The Middle East Region Is Quieter Today Than It Has Been in Two Decades'," *The Atlantic* [7 October 2023]. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-war-middle-east-jake-sullivan/675580/.

for broader global geopolitics as great powers continue to use the region as a means of testing each other and using the region as their conflict laboratory?

In 2003 I attended a training seminar for new foreign area officers (FAOs). During that conference I asked a member of the training team from the FAO proponent office why there were so many army attachés or security cooperation chiefs in the Middle East who were majors or lieutenant colonels while every single similar position in Central and South America were colonels. His paraphrased answer was that during the 1990s no one believed that we would again go to war in the Middle East and that the only war that mattered was the war on drugs. I questioned him at the time about Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, and Desert Fox as well as Operations Southern Watch and Northern Watch. He simply shrugged.

That was the first time that I thought about the Eagles' 1976 classic song "Hotel California." In particular, I thought about the ending sentence which says, "You can check out any time you like but you can never leave." The Middle East is that for America and the American national security apparatus. America can check out mentally, professionally, and academically, but it can never leave. That doesn't mean that America is a literal prisoner, but as stated in the lyrics of "Hotel California", America is a prisoner of its own device.

The are four simple reasons that keep America a prisoner of its own device in the Middle East: oil, religion, non-state actors, and great power struggles. In many ways these answers are obvious expressions. The point of this article is not to dive into these four reasons specifically though the discussion that follows will provide information that does touch on many of them, but the purpose is to identify the contextual reasons that make understanding the Middle East so complicated for so many leaders and policy makers seeking simple solutions.

To understand the Middle East one can easily get sucked into a variety of rabbit holes that can go rather far back in history. There are roots of conflict in the region and deep roots. The dividing line between the two is World War I and the collapse and dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate and the loss of the caliph of Islam. This article focuses on the events in the roots of conflict construct and offers twenty-five events plus one military theory that have shaped the narrative space for the war that many people believe began on 7 October 2023.[5]

The first point is the importance of the question: "where do you draw the line?" This is a common question that rarely leads to an informative discussion and is often asked in a regular conversation to frustrate a useful discussion or resolution to a problem. In the case of understanding the Middle East and the conflict associated with Israel, this question is quite important as where one draws the line may well determine how one sees the problem. If the problem begins on 7 October 2023, then it is easy to place the blame on Hamas. If the line is drawn on 29 November 1947 with the United Nations vote to partition Palestine, then one can blame the international community. If one draws the line on 6 June 1967 which was when Israel completed the capture of the Gaza Strip during the Six-Day War and the beginning of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, then one may place the blame on Israel. What follows is an attempt to provide those events that provide context for why some people draw the line where they do. Understanding these events should help one to see the complexity in the

[5] The list of twenty-five plus one is as follows: Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, Sykes-Picot Agreement, Balfour Declaration, Dissolution of the Caliphate, Increased Jewish Immigration, Establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Uprisings and the 1939 White Paper, The Final Solution, The State Solution, 1948 War and Al-Nakba, Twin Pillars Policy, 1967 War, 1973 War and the Camp David Accords, 1979 Iranian Revolution, Birth of Hezbollah, Globalized Jihad and the birth of al-Qaeda, Birth of Hamas, Intifadas, Operation Desert Storm, al-Qaeda's Declaration of War and GWOT, 2006 Lebanon War, Arab Spring, Mowing the Grass, The Abraham Accords, ISIS and the Islamic Revolution, and *The Management of Savagery*.

events currently transpiring as well as the difficulties in coming up with some type of mutually acceptable solution to these events.

The events have been divided up into seven sections: competing promises, inter-war problems, "solutions", the state of Israel and state responses, Islamism, America in the Middle East, and resolutions. None of these will be addressed in detail. The intent here is to provide an awareness of the complexity of events and to also see what must be understood to begin the necessary healing for there to be peace.

Competing Promises

World War I was the Great War for Great Britain, and it taxed the empire more than any previous conflict. In 1914, the British Empire ruled over the largest population of Muslims on earth and the declaration by the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph of a global jihad against the enemies of Islam and forbidding Muslims to fight against the Central Powers in addition to an Ottoman attack against the Suez Canal led the British Empire to look for friends everywhere and further caused them to make promises to those various friends of access to the same pieces of territory through three particularly well know sets of documents.

For those familiar with diplomatic language one can easily see in the documents that much less was actually committed to than most critics state. That said, it can be easily seen that the British were offering access to the Levantine coast of the Middle East to three different peoples: Arabs, French, and Jews.

The first of the three was not a single document, but a series of letters as part of a correspondence between Hussein the Sharif of Mecca and Henry McMahon the British High Commissioner of Egypt between July 1915 and March 1916.[6] McMahon received a request from Hussein, and he continued the correspondence implying and then stating that the British would support an Arab state. It was this correspondence that generated the British mission in support of the Arab revolt that was made famous through the acts and coverage of British officer Thomas Edward Lawrence. In those letters it could be read that the Levantine Middle East was promised to the Arabs.

The second was a document that was originally negotiated between the British, French, and Russian governments while the correspondence with Sharif Hussein was ongoing. This is known to us today as the Sykes-Picot Agreement for British politician and officer Mark Sykes and French diplomat Georges Francois Picot as the Russian negotiator's name was dropped once the Russian Revolution began. The purpose of the negotiations and later the agreement was to determine how the Ottoman Empire would be divided once the war ended. For those who criticize the British and French for this effort as some expression of European colonialism, it is important to note that the victors of the Great War carved up the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires as well and placed new lines all over Europe. It was generally accepted in the early twentieth century that to the victors went the right to redraw the map regardless of which opponents' territory was being carved up. This agreement was an agreement and not an official treaty. Much of what was promised to the French was never realized as it was never taken from the Turks. When reading the document, one could read it in a very positive way and see that the agreement wasn't in contradiction to the correspondence with Sharif Hussein.[7] In practice, the

[6] Henry McMahon and Hussein bin Ali, Cmd.5957; Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, G.C.M.G., His Majesty's High Commissioner at. Cairo and the Sherif Hussein of Mecca, July, 1915–March, 1916, published 1939 with map.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Correspondence_between_Sir_Henry_McMahon_and_the_Sherif_Hussein_of_Mecca_Cmd_5957.pdf

[7] The agreement in the below reference is as part of correspondence between Sir Edward Grey, then serving as the

French sent an army into Syria in 1920 to expel Sharif Hussein and his leadership from Damascus and used the Sykes-Picot Agreement as their justification to do so.

The third was the Balfour Declaration. Arthur Balfour was the British Foreign Minister in 1917 and he was approached by Baron Rothschild to seek a declaration in favor of a homeland for the Jewish people in the land of Palestine. Balfour eventually signed the declaration and by doing so seemed to offer the land of Palestine to a third group of people. This wasn't actually true, and it was, in no way, a legally binding commitment to do anything. In reading the details of the document one can easily see that the British government doesn't commit to anything, but it does state that the British government looks favorably upon the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine.[8] As with the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the proof of intent comes in the actions in the years to follow when there was a spike in Jewish immigration to British mandatory Palestine.

Inter-War Problems

The Ottoman Empire ended on 1 November 1922 when the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph stepped down and there was a designation of a person known only as the Caliph. That person and the designated position ended on 3 March 1924. One can make the argument that the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph was a Turk and never a descendant of the same tribe as was the Prophet Mohamed. One can further argue that few Muslims globally acknowledged the Sultan-Caliph's ideological or legal suzerainty over them. The lack of significant disruption from the Sultan-Caliph's call to jihad is a simple example. Regardless of the acceptance or lack thereof experienced by the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph, the position was no longer. For the first time in something close to 1,290 years there was no caliph on the earth. In a poetic sense there was no leader for the faith and the faithful which had existed from the Prophet Mohamed until 1924. There was no successor of the Prophet Mohamed and no one to unifyingly lead the community of the faithful. The absence of the caliph was felt much stronger than was his existence.

The loss of the unifying position was nearly coincident with the extension of European authority over the former Ottoman lands except for what came to be the Republic of Turkey. The League of Nations gave mandates for Palestine and Syria to Great Britain and France, respectively. Not only did European powers divide up the lands of the Ottoman Empire, but they also sought to establish European-styled states in the region. In addition to the creation of the states, most of which were governed by European powers through mandatory designations from the League of Nations whereas many of the rest had significant European influence including military and foreign policy.

During the 1920s Hassan al-Banna and others formed a group called the Muslim Brotherhood with the intent of establishing an international Islamic group with emphasis on establishing a Muslim polity based off Islamic law or *sharia* and not beholden to any secular leadership. This group became the sole pan-Arab or pan-Islamic group as it ultimately spread across the Arab and then later the Islamic worlds with a variety of off-shoot groups. Its adherents or associated actors attempted to control and dominate a variety of states throughout the region to include members of an extremist offshoot group who took credit for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. [By the time of the 2023 Hamas War the leaders of Turkey and Qatar as well as the satellite channel Al-Jazeera all had strong links to the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology.]

British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Paul Cambon, the French Ambassador to London.
Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, Sykes-Picot Agreement, 16 May 1916.
https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sykes-Picot_Agreement

[8] Arthur James Balfour, The Balfour Declaration [2 November 1917].
https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Balfour_Declaration.

Into the 1920s and 1930s British mandate of Palestine came a consistent and increasing number of Jewish migrants as they left the chaotic and collapsing Russian Empire and other post-World War I European states. Britain allowed the Jewish purchase of land and the establishment of communal living in kibbutzim. Jewish immigration came at a cost. Unlike previous changes in land ownership done by mostly absentee landlords, the Jews intended to live on the land, work the land, and turn the land into something commercially viable. That meant displacing Palestinians who were often not the landowners and usually lived on and worked the land in some form of tenant farmer status.

Obviously, the displacement of Palestinian farmers by thousands and tens of thousands of immigrants outraged the Palestinians. There were strikes, marches, and revolts using significant amounts of violence that took the British Army, locally sourced militia, police, and military organizations to quell over three years that started in 1936. Finally, the British government issued a white paper in 1939 that stated that there would be an eventual end to Jewish immigration.[9] That policy was obviously interrupted by World War II and the associated holocaust of Jews throughout Nazi controlled Europe. After the beginning of World War II and in response to the White Paper, David Ben Gurion, then the chairman of the Jewish Agency stated, "We will fight the war as if there were no White Paper, and we will fight the White Paper as if there were no war."[10]

"Solutions"

World War II was a watershed in the Middle East for many reasons. It effectively introduced two ideas to the world that are crucial to understanding the Middle East: the Nazi Final Solution for dealing with the Nazi stated problem of Jews by exterminating all Jews under Nazi authority and the state solution for the post-war Jewish refugee problem. Related to these two "solutions" are the following points.

One, the Arab and other natives in the region were disinclined to support or root for their colonial overlords: Great Britain and France. As a result, many Middle Eastern people expressed an affinity for Germany in the contest. The rising tensions regarding Jewish immigration in Palestine in combination with the anti-Jewish rhetoric and policies coming from Germany both before and during the war garnered additional Arab support.

Two, the effort by Adolf Hitler and his senior subordinates to actively slaughter the Jews created sympathy for the Jewish plight on behalf of Western powers, generated a genuine Jewish refugee crisis following the war, and exacerbated the Jewish sense of homelessness as Jews returned to villages and towns to lost property, anger, and violent, deadly attacks from non-Nazi former neighbors.

Where was home if you were a European Jew in 1945 and 1946? There wasn't a home. Jews could stay in or near the death camps. Apparently, Jews couldn't return to their home countries and former physical homes. The solution to Jewish homelessness created by Hitler's Final Solution was turned over to the fledgling United Nations.

The United Nations developed a somewhat elaborate land division deal with respect to Mandatory Palestine: divide it between Jews and Palestinian Arabs. The partition plan was voted on and passed by the United Nations General Assembly as Resolution 181 with all voting Arab and/or Muslim countries voting against the partition and the United States, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics leading most nations to vote in favor. There was officially to be a Jewish state in Palestine.

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[9] Secretary of State for the Colonies, Palestine: Statement of Policy, His Majesty's Stationary Office [May 1939]. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1939_White_Paper_cmd_6019.djvu or https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brwh1939.asp.

[10] The Jewish Agency for Israel, "The White Paper of 1939" [7 August 2005]. https://archive.jewishagency.org/ben-gurion/content/23436/.

Three, the United States became a major player in the Middle East for the first time in its history. President Franklin Roosevelt met with the king of Saudi Arabia on the *USS Quincy* in the Red Sea as the president returned from the Yalta Conference with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. In that meeting, supposedly President Roosevelt agreed to protect the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from external aggression and to consult with the king regarding any decisions about Palestine.[11] Whether or not Harry Truman was informed of these agreements following President Roosevelt's death, Truman didn't adhere to them in spirit or letter.

The State of Israel and State Responses

The Palestinian Arabs did not take well to the United Nations decision to partition Palestine and violence began almost immediately after the vote was announced. The British planned to pull out of Palestine in the spring of 1948 and Israel declared its independence on 14 May 1948 to make sure that it captured a moment and didn't allow the fate of a Jewish state be referred to an international body. The war that followed established two key principles that have remained ever since.

One, every conflict that takes place in Palestine or Israel is done according to some international game clock. It is as if the global community will only allow people in that part of the world to kill each other so long before it will step in and demand some sort of ceasefire or cessation of hostilities. This happened during the 1948 War when it served the interest of the Israeli people. The ceasefire allowed Israel to consolidate and resupply such that when the fighting resumed, Israel had the advantage, and it went on to secure the borders that have generally lasted as legitimate Israel until the present.

Two, this was a catastrophe or *al-nakba* for the Palestinian people. The Arabic phrase literally translates as The Catastrophe which is what it was. The cause of the catastrophe is open for debate and has shifted – to a degree – over time. Was this the catastrophe of incompetent and poorly coordinated Arab states who could not defeat a single Jewish one? Or, was it the catastrophe of Jewish expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and villages as a form of ethnic cleansing. The latter interpretation is what predominates in the twenty-first century among the Palestinians and the Palestinian *diaspora*. Such a grievance has given energy to resistance of Israeli occupation of all Palestinian lands; meaning all of what many Palestinians regard as Palestine exclusive of what are regarded as illegitimate Israeli claims on the land.

In July and November 1969, President Richard Nixon restated American policies for dealing with the global situation in what became known as the Nixon Doctrine.[12] Most of the doctrine was related to Vietnam, but it had significance for the Middle East as well. The idea was to help provide stability and security globally by empowering and supporting states to secure themselves and help secure their respective regions. In what is commonly called the Twin Pillars Policy, the Middle East was to be secured via support to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In 1967, in anticipation of a threatening arms build-up on its borders by Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, Israel again went to war against multiple Arab states and defeated all of them. From 1948 to 1967 the Gaza Strip belonged to Egypt and the West Bank belonged to Jordan. Israel felt that it was being

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[11] Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present,* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 470-471.
George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, fourth edition, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, 582-583.

[12] Richard M. Nixon, "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen," *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara [25 July 1969]. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/informal-remarks-guam-with-newsmen.
Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam," *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara [3 November 1969]. https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-war-vietnam.

surrounded by hostile forces that included the blocking of the exits from the Gulf of Aqaba by Egypt. This was a cause for war in Israeli geo-political thinking. Consequently, Israel launched a preemptive attack against Egypt that captured the Gaza Strip and the entirety of the Sinai Peninsula. Supporting artillery fire from the Jordanian Armed Forces led to Israel attacking into the West Bank to capture Jerusalem and the entire West Bank up to the Jordan River. Finally, Israel attacked into the Golan Heights to secure that territory from the Syrians who had been using the dominating high ground to conduct artillery raids into northern Israel. In six days, Israel defeated three major Arab states who were supported by military units from other neighboring states.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War effectively destroyed the notion of the power of the Arab state to achieve goals vis-à-vis Israel. While non-state actors were extant prior to 1967 they became more and more significant since that war. It was the Arab state failure in the 1967 War that led to the transformation from a state centered approach to fight Israel toward a non-state centered approach. The variety of ways to attack Israel through the narrative space as part of a narrative war was born in the frustrated failure of 1967. One might even see in Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's approach to the 1973 War a narrative war approach. He didn't intend to win the war through violence. He intended to win the war through diplomatic negotiation and what he needed to begin that negotiation was a military success which the crossing of the Suez Canal gave him.[13]

Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on Yom Kippur, 6 October 1973, with tactical and strategic surprise. The Egyptian Army crossed the Suez Canal, captured dozens of Israeli defensive fortifications, and established a seemingly impervious anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile shield. Syria was also initially successful in its surprise and gains in the Golan Heights. Israel responded and was able to drive the Syrians from the Golan and to cross the Suez Canal itself and surround an Egyptian army. Regardless of the military gains, the 1973 War set the stage for a negotiation between Egypt and Israel.

The negotiations that followed resulted in the first peace treaty between an Arab country and Israel with the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979 with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and U.S. president James Carter. The sad lesson that came out of the agreement was the assassination of President Sadat on 6 October 1981 by extremists with loose association to the Muslim Brotherhood.[14] The lesson was that to sign a peace deal with Israel can mean death.

Islamism

The year 1979 was momentous for the Middle East. Not only did it see the signing of the Camp David Accords, but it also saw the overthrow of the Shah of Iran initially by secularists and then later by Islamists. For decades, the Muslim Brotherhood and other related and off-shoot groups in the Sunni world called for the overthrow of Western influence in the region and the establishment of an Islamic state. The sad note for those groups was that it did happen in 1979, but not because of Sunni fundamentalism; rather, it was brought about by Iranian Shia fundamentalism. In a region where the Sunni tended to look down on the Shia this was significant. The Iranian religious scholars who led the transformation of the revolution into a religious one called it an Islamic Revolution, but it was only an Iranian Revolution in that in 1979 it only directly affected Iran. It wasn't until the 2000s with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that empowered Iran and 2014 and the arrival of ISIS in power in Iraq that the revolution became something closer to an Islamic Revolution as Iran expanded its influence throughout the region

[13] George W. Gawrych, *The 1973 Arab-Israeli War: The Albatross of Decisive Victory,* Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1996, 9 and 13.

[14] Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11,* New York: Vintage Books, 2006, 58-59.

with both Shia militias and Sunni non-state actors.

Success in Iran in 1979 gave heart and focus to Shia groups around the world as well as to all Islamists. The intellectual heart of Twelver Shiism was southern Lebanon and following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, various Shia militia groups began to band together under the leadership and financing of Iranian agents to create a group that later called itself Hezbollah (the party of God).

Hezbollah was a group born in opposition to Israeli occupation and developed in clashes with American military and government forces and installations in and around Beirut and also with the Israeli Defense Forces. Hezbollah's attacks in concert with those of other oppositional Lebanese groups effectively caused Israel to withdraw further into southern Lebanon in 1985 and then out of all of Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah took credit for defeating Israel on both occasions and in 2006. Defeating Israel was something that no Arab state accomplished and therefore Hezbollah held a pride of place among non-state actors operating against Israel.

While Israel was operating in southern Lebanon, the Palestinians in the occupied territories rose in opposition to that occupation in a shaking off or Intifada. The First Intifada (1987-1993) tended to be less violent, or the violence was mostly limited to non-lethal means such as rock throwing and occasionally elevated into Molotov cocktails and other more dangerous methods. The intent was to shake off the occupation. One might say that this intifada resulted in the Oslo Accords that resulted in the establishment of the Palestinian Authority with its headquarters in Ramallah and later the recognition of Israel by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Palestinians did not feel that what followed was a sufficient improvement in their situation and there was a Second Intifada or the al-Aqsa Intifada because of its precipitating event of a visit by Israeli politician Arial Sharon to the Temple Mount or the Haram al-Shareef which is the location of the al-Aqsa Mosque. This intifada included much more violence in terms of lethal violence used by both sides and served to further harden positions as the Israelis saw it as a result of concessions made in the Oslo Accords and the failure of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinians blamed the increased protocols of the occupation that increased Palestinian humiliations and disenfranchisement. It was at the end of the Second Intifada that Ariel Sharon, then the Prime Minister, ordered the unilateral withdrawal of all Israelis from the Gaza Strip.

In the late 1980s a Muslim Brotherhood affiliated group using an acronym for a name issued a declaration of undying war against Israel in the form of its charter. Its full name is the Islamic Resistance Movement, and its acronym is Hamas. Unlike Hezbollah which is a Shia organization with direct ties to Iran, Hamas is a Sunni group that only developed financial support ties to Iran after decades of opposition to Israel. Hamas won elections in the Palestinian territories in 2006 and has turned that victory into near complete governance of the Gaza Strip and an ever-growing presence in the West Bank. Hamas is the face of the Palestinian violent opposition to Israel, and it has been Hamas who has maintained some sense of continued violence. The organization's charter is clear in that it wants to see the destruction of the state of Israel to be fully replaced by a Palestinian state in the entirety of the former mandatory Palestine. [15]

While Hezbollah fought Israel in Lebanon and Hamas fought it in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere in the occupied territories, an obscure group calling itself al-Qaeda declared war on the United States of

[15] "Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine," translated by Muhammad Maqdsi, J*ournal of Palestine Studies*, Summer, 1993, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), 122-134. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538093.
"Hamas in 2017: The document in full," translated by the Middle East Eye Staff, *Middle East Eye* [2 May 2017]. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full.
Hamas has published two charters as linked above in 1988 and 2017.

America, twice.[16] Each declaration served a profound purpose in defining the fight between the Islamist interpretation of the Middle East and the West, writ large and America, in specific. Al-Qaeda's greatest act of violence was that against the United States on 11 September 2001 killing 2,977 and wounding thousands more. It was this attack that drew the United States into the Middle East in force and was the genesis for the Global War on Terrorism.

Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda are all a bit different and greatly different in the specifics of how they see Islamism enacted in the world. All these groups claim to want to govern the community of believers through Islamic Law, but the differences in the interpretation of that law are significant. Currently, these actors are acting in concert in opposition to United States' interests and to weaken and eventually destroy Israel. That agreement is certain to be temporary because if they could remove Israel as a state in the region, they would almost certainly turn against each other.

America in the Middle East

America first entered the Middle East in the post-World War II world in force during the 1990-1991 Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. These operations are important in that they brought in nearly 700,000 American military personnel to defeat the Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. After removing Saddam's army from Kuwait, the Americans redeployed most of its forces, but not all. American military forces remained in many bases, some of which predated the 1990-1991 operations, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. It was the American failure to depart the Arabian Peninsula, in particular, that was used by Osama bin Laden as a justification of his attacks against United States interests in Africa, the Middle East, and then in the United States.

Obviously, the attacks on 9/11 initiated the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) that saw American forces sent to fight against so-labeled terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Sudan, Libya, Syria, and numerous other countries around the world. The use of the expression so labeled is that many of the groups after which American forces were sent were not considered to be terrorists by locals or regional actors. Whether or not such labeling was accurate, this war involved America in a religious war without ever acknowledging the need or importance to study religion or the adoption or use of overt religious motives or objectives. Whether or not such an approach was correct, the region saw the use of the word crusade by President George W. Bush as an explicit call for a religious war and all subsequent attempts to veil it were just that.[17]

Resolutions

As America was embroiled in the GWOT, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli patrol and outpost, killing several soldiers, and capturing two others and the Israelis responded with significant violence. The Israeli response destroyed a great deal of Lebanese infrastructure as Israel tried to force Hezbollah to stop

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[16] Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," Counter-Terrorism Center, West Point, New York [23 August 1996]. https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf
Osama bin Laden, "Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders: World Islamic Front Statement," Federa*tion of American Scientists* [23 February 1998]. https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm.
Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States in 1996 and 1998 which are both provided in the references above. Each is a bit different from the other, but they are both fundamentally following the same operational and strategic approach to exhaust America through murder and economic stress.

[17] George W. Bush, Remarks by the President Upon Arrival, The White House [16 September 2001]. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html.

firing rockets into Israel. Hezbollah did not stop so long as the war continued. The incessant firing led Israel to launch a ground invasion of southern Lebanon. The regional consensus, at the time of fighting in 2006, was that Hezbollah won the engagement.[18] Years later, the Israeli perception changed as the northern border with Lebanon remained quieter than it had ever been for longer than it had ever been.

While the 2006 War was probably not the birth of the concept, it became an example of the idea of mowing the grass. When one has a yard full of weeds the only real alternative is to regularly mow the grass to keep the weeds down and manageable. In the case of conflict with Hamas or other related groups like Islamic Jihad and Fatah-related organizations, the Israelis believed that they needed to regularly, every couple of years or so, reassert its dominant and deterrent position by responding to a particular attack with a significant amount of force intended to reduce Palestinian resistance capability such that attacks would be necessarily reduced for years to come. For example, Israel conducted operations in or against Gaza in the following years: 2005 (withdrawal of Israelis from Gaza), 2006, 2008-2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2021, 2022, and 2023. Mowing the grass was something done when there was no other perceived option than punishment and when there was no perceived partner or positive outcome possible, only punitive.

Throughout the post-Operation Desert Storm period, the Palestinian linked groups, regional Islamist actors, and other non-state actors throughout the Middle East transformed their approaches to war. They all sort of evolved to include four key elements. One, they changed the definition of conflict success to essentially be an existential definition, meaning that if the group continued to exist despite the pounding it may have taken in a conflict with the West or Israel then it was winning. Two, the groups needed to absorb the high-technology punishment that the West and Israel could inflict on them. This absorption was envisioned through going literally underground or by dispersing both weapons and personnel amongst the civilian population. Three, the groups needed to deter attacks by developing the ability to continually attack Israel or the West in depth through rockets, mortars, or suicide attacks and by convincing their opponents that they would never end the fight. This last point is directly connected to four, which is basing the entire strategy on exhausting the will of the opponent. This transformation in the non-state actor approach was best captured by retired Israeli brigadier general Itai Brun.[19]

On 18 December 2010 a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia set himself on fire to protest the oppressive and corrupt government then in power. His self-immolation provided a fire that swept across much of North Africa and the Middle East to touch almost every country at least through demonstrations and topple more than one regime: notably in Egypt and Libya. Even though the precipitating event took place in the winter, the general movement was labeled the Arab Spring in hopes that new governments and new freedoms would grow from the uprisings. The Arab Spring did two critical things related to understanding the Middle East in 2023. One, it toppled the Egyptian government of Hosni Mubarak and replaced him in elections with a Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi. Morsi's rise to power in Egypt was the fulfillment of the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts for more than eighty years. While short-lived as he was soon replaced in a military coup, it was still a powerful message across the region and signaled a rift between Muslim Brotherhood states (e.g. Turkey and Qatar) and non-Muslim Brotherhood states (e.g. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain). Two, the Arab Spring inspired protests in Syria that grew into a civil war creating a vacuum of leadership into which ISIS

[18] Matt M. Matthews, *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War,* Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008, 61.

[19] Itai Brun, "'While You're Busy Making Other Plans' - The 'Other RMA'," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33: 4, 535-565 [20 August 2010]. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2010.489708.

was able to step and grow.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or ISIS was a critical player in reshaping the relationship between the United States and the region. Though it existed in the region for more than a decade, it burst into America's consciousness with its stunning successes in taking Syrian and Iraqi cities in 2014. ISIS combined spectacular violence that included beheading, immolation, stoning, and other attention-grabbing approaches to violence with a mastery of social media to broadcast and narrowcast material throughout the world. Its actions, in combination with the anti-Assad regime sentiment generated by the Syrian Civil War generated tens of thousands of foreign fighters and local recruits to join the newly declared caliphate. ISIS also generated a significant response from the Islamic Republic of Iran which was primarily to mobilize and fund Shia militia groups. The Shia groups in Syria primarily fought for the Basher al-Assad regime and the groups in Iraq fought in opposition to ISIS. The figurative explosion of Shia militias across Mesopotamia, the Levant, and in Yemen in combination with Iranian monetary support for non-Shia groups throughout the Middle East during the decade from 2010 to 2020 turned the Iranian Revolution of 1979 into a true Islamic Revolution. ISIS didn't start the rise of Iranian non-state actor support, but it served as a type of catalyst to accelerate the expansion and, to a degree, give a cloak of state sponsorship to the activities as the Syrian government needed the militias to save itself and the Iraqi government needed the Shia militias to drive off ISIS.

The United States presidential administration of Donald J. Trump approach the Israeli security problems differently than any president before him. He didn't seek to resolve the Palestinian issues, rather, he chose to ignore them or to downgrade them in priority. The Trump administration instead sought to make deals between Israel and Arab or Muslim states. These deals have been collectively labeled the Abraham accords and eventually involved some form of recognition from and cooperation with the following states: Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.[20] Much of the calendar year 2023 included discussions of whether Saudi Arabia would join the accords in some fashion. This was a significant change in the United States approach to the challenges of the Middle East and it seemed to be having effect until the attacks on 7 October 2023.

An Appropriate Theory for War

All the events listed above provide a narrative space in which the various actors act. What is needed is a theory for action that informs the reader how the actor will use their acts to achieve an ultimate outcome. There are many writers in the Middle East who have provided such a theory, but *The Management of Savagery: The Most Difficult Phase through which the Umma Must Pass* is the single best expression of how actions work to accomplish the desired end.

Abu Bakr Naji is a pseudonym for the author of *The Management of Savagery*. This book was published in Arabic in 2004 and made available in English in 2006. Abu Bakr Naji is considered to have been an al-Qaeda strategist and his book captures an operational approach for fighting against the West and its lackeys in the Middle East.[21] Even though the book predates what most people label as ISIS and was written for Sunni and not Shia actors, the words and approach explained in the book are important for understanding how ISIS, Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, Iranian-back Shia militias, and all similarly structured and ideologically motivated groups use exhaustion as their preeminent strategy for

[20] U.S. Department of State, The Abraham Accords Declaration [15 September 2020]. https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/.
The site includes links to the specific agreements between the various Arab countries and Israel: Bahrain, Morrocco, United Arab Emirates, and Sudan.

[21] Alastair Crooke, "The ISIS' 'Management of Savagery' in Iraq," *The World Pos*t [30 June 2014].

accomplishing objectives. The book is more than a theoretical text as it has been found on almost all ISIS computer hard drives that have been captured and exploited making this, effectively, an ISIS operational manual.[22]

Naji explains that the way to defeat the West is through defeating the media halo surrounding it and then to weaken it over time through the weight of its own security.[23] Naji suggests that when the mujahidin attack one resort, it forces the opposing governments to defend all similar resorts. "For example: If a tourist resort that the Crusaders patronize in Indonesia is hit, all of the tourist resorts in all of the states of the world will have to be secured by the work of additional forces, which are double the ordinary amount, and a huge increase in spending."[24] The same is true if the mujahidin attack a refinery and so on. As the opponent guards more and more facilities, the cost to pay the people and purchase the equipment to scan, search, and protect every facility will ultimately crush the opponent under its very weight. The view is to exhaust the opponent economically and morally.

ISIS did this through its disruption campaign in 2012 and 2013. It forced the governments of Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria to guard everywhere. Both governments failed to do so, and cities fell in days and hours. One could say that Hamas was able to pull off its spectacular raid on 7 October 2023 because it exhausted the Israel Defense Force.

So What?

Let's assume that we all agree on the above information. Where does that leave those who think about, plan for, and pontificate on Middle East and American national security? There will not be a long-term peaceful and stable Middle East without significant American leadership and energy. The states and non-state actors in the region have decades and generations of animosity regarding each other. There are no accidents, and everyone is a villain in the other actor's story. This means that the region needs a strong hand to make all the actors abide by the rules of the game. That can't be done internally to the region because there is no single player in the region that has the demographic, financial, and/or narrative capacity to provide the regional leadership necessary for such peace and stability. Every major regional player lacks significance in one or more of the three areas identified. Saudi Arabia doesn't have the people, Turkey has too much Ottoman and Muslim Brotherhood baggage, Egypt cannot manage its own population and it doesn't have the money, and no one in the region would dare accept Israeli leadership. It may be possible for the region to be self-stable eventually through some stitched together lattice of relationships as imagined in the most comprehensive version of the Abraham Accords, but such a latticework would require significant involvement on the part of America for at least a generation for the lattice to solidify to provide the self-supporting structure as demonstrated by the Arab state reactions to the events following 7 October 2023. None is confident enough in their population's support of the accords to give even lukewarm support to Israel.

The region must have a great power providing the outside leadership and incentives to inspire, cajole, or coerce peaceful coexistence. China cannot do it because no one in the region really wants long term and invasive Chinese influence. China doesn't really inspire friendship and loyalty and Arabs and Persians are not known for providing fealty. Russia provides strong leadership, but Russia is a bully

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[22] Alastair Crooke, "The ISIS' 'Management of Savagery' in Iraq," *The World Pos*t [30 June 2014].
Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, New York: Regan Arts, 2015, 44-46.

[23] Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Umma Will Pass*, translated by William McCants, Cambridge, MA: John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004 (original), 23 May 2006 (translated), 17-23.

[24] Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, 46.

regardless of who sits as the Czar or Czarina and the region knows this. That leaves only America.

America cannot leave. Oil is necessary for the global economy until the world embraces nuclear energy at scale and oddly enough the Middle East seems to be one of the regions seeking to embrace such energy. America cannot abandon the region for domestic religious reasons. The American Great Awakening still resonates in American communities and that religious period taught America that it was the New Jerusalem giving the country an affinity for the original Jerusalem. That affinity will not go away for generations yet to come. If America leaves the region, then non-state actors with violent intent will fester and grow as was witnessed since Barack Obama's pivot to Asia that began in 2011 and was made a lie on 7 October 2023.[25] The ill will is there and has been there for more than a century. It will take something like a century of stability for that ill will to be dissipated if it ever is. Finally, the Middle East is where great powers compete in the twenty-first century. It used to be in Europe, but following World War II the competition space moved to the Middle East for many reasons that have been mentioned above and needs more space to address properly. As far as this paper goes, it just is. For those who think that America shouldn't play in the great power competition, that is just naïve. American rules are how the world works and if China were to win in this competition, then those rules will be rewritten to benefit China and harm American interests thereby harming the livelihoods of Americans. This competition matters and so we cannot leave. This is what it means to be a prisoner of your own device.

If America cannot leave, then this paper strongly encourages America to not checkout again. America needs to stay in the Hotel California committedly through study, understanding, and empathy with the purpose of gaining and wisely using influence across and throughout the region to build that future self-supporting latticework of peace, security, and stability that is so badly needed. The following rules are useful in achieving as much.

General Rules

What has preceded this are twenty-five plus one events that need to be understood. What follows are general rules derived from an understanding of the region that can inform policy and interactions in the region.

- Know the Middle East. As this paper began, this region is America's "Hotel California" and it is imperative that American government, military, and academics need to know why we are prisoners here of our own device.
- See the pyramid. Or, at least recognize that there is more than a square's perspective. Every group, nation, or people in the region has a perspective that is accurate for them and needs to be understood to successfully operate or influence in the region.
- Believe what they say and write. When Iran calls for the destruction of Israel or refers to the United States as the Great Satan, when Hamas calls for the elimination of Israel, or al-Qaeda states that it is on the side of God, believe them. Yes, it is poetic hyperbole, but like with scripture that also uses poetic hyperbole, they believe it to be an expression of truth to be enacted in the world. They mean what they say. They are seeking to create a world in which those statements will be made true. That doesn't mean that there is no room for negotiation or temporary agreement, but such negotiators should never confuse the short term with actual belief. For example, just because one of these actors makes a deal, doesn't mean that that actor now wants to become a part of the international order and be welcomed into the family of nations that follows rules established by secular or other religious leaders and countries.

[25] Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," *Brookings* [21 December 2011]. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/.

- The conflict environment has changed. It is not World War II, Operation Desert Storm, nor Operation Iraqi Freedom. Social media has given greater impetus to spectacular attacks and emphasis on such. Expect greater emphasis on what the West labels atrocities and use of prior grievances as atrocities as justification for the same.
- Do your homework to know the narrative space. Know the roots and the deep roots of conflict in the region. Nothing that happens is a result of what happened yesterday. Yesterday may have been the earthquake, but the earth shook because of the tensions created in the years, decades, and centuries that preceded it.

Conclusion

Since America is somewhat stuck in the Middle East (our Hotel California) then it behooves national security and military professionals to understand what created the Middle East environment with which such professional interact. The discussion above tries to provide an introduction or primer to those events that are deemed by this author as necessary to begin such an understanding. This is by no means a comprehensive list, nor does it represent sufficient understanding, but it is hopefully a useful beginning. The purpose of the article is to be an invitation for further study.

List of the Twenty Five + One

Competing Promises

1. Hussein-McMahon Correspondence
2. Sykes-Picot Agreement
3. Balfour Declaration

Inter-war Problems

4. Dissolution of the Caliphate
5. Increased Jewish Immigration
6. Establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood
7. Arab Uprisings and the 1939 White Paper

"Solutions"

8. The Final Solution
9. The State Solution

The State of Israel and State Responses

10. 1948 War and Al-Nakba
11. Twin Pillars Policy
12. 1967 War
13. 1973 War and the Camp David Accords

Islamism

14. 1979 Iranian Revolution
15. Birth of Hezbollah
16. Globalized Jihad and the birth of al-Qaeda
17. Birth of Hamas
18. Intifadas

America in the Middle East

19. Operation Desert Storm
20. Al-Qaeda's Declaration of War and GWOT

Resolutions

21. 2006 Lebanon War
22. Mowing the Grass
23. Arab Spring
24. ISIS and the Islamic Revolution
25. The Abraham Accords

An Appropriate Theory for War

26. T*he Management of Savagery*