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Time to discard Middle East mythologies
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With a headiness nourished by electoral victory, every incoming American president succumbs to “new president’s disease” – the confidence that, with more brains, more effort, and a better staff in and around the Oval Office, he will succeed on longstanding challenges where his predecessors have failed.

No challenge has so dominated the time of recent presidents as the fiery mix of issues that span the Middle East. But, in addressing them, our presidents have consistently operated on the basis of a conventional wisdom from our foreign policy establishment whose central tenets have repeatedly proved false.

With faulty assumptions about conflicts across the region, relations between key states and the motivations of those atop particular regimes driving their policies, our presidents have been doomed from the start.

Herewith, then, are four key mythologies about the Middle East that we would be wise to discard as soon as possible if we hope to make progress on the vexing challenges that plague the region and threaten our security:

First, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key regional issue, and progress in that arena will lead to progress in others. The conflict supposedly inflames the region, prevents larger Arab-Israeli peace, fuels jihadism and, in so doing, threatens U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In fact, no canard has hurt U.S. foreign policymaking more, convincing presidents to invest time on a conflict that our enemies exploit for their convenience and that, under current conditions, stands no chance of resolution.

What drives the insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan and the terrorists of Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas are various strains of a militant Islam whose roots date back hundreds of years but whose resurgence as a driving force in today’s global politics was motivated by key events over the last century.

These events include Mustafa Kemal Ataturk’s abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, which Al-Qaeda and other radical Sunni groups aim to resurrect; the birth of Israel in 1948, which Islamists consider an unacceptable stain on Muslim land; the presence of U.S. troops in the holy land of Saudi Arabia during and after the first Gulf War, about which Osama bin Laden complained bitterly when he declared war on America in the late 1990s; and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which established a radical regime that serves as the most active state sponsor of terrorism and works to export its theocratic form of government and revolutionary ideology across the region.

Egypt and Jordan have made peace with Israel; Iran, Syria, and Saudi Arabia have not. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not drive the decisions of any of them. And while our foreign policy establishment may believe that Palestinian suffering motivates state-based anger at Israel across the region, none of these states has offered any real assistance to improve the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza.

Second, Palestinians want land for peace. Conventional wisdom has it half-right. Palestinians want land. The problem is that, from their leadership through their population, most of them want it all, “from the river to the sea” – the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea – including what’s currently known as the state of Israel. No presidential peace-making will alter that reality.

Palestinian “rejectionism,” among its leadership and, perhaps more important, among its people, is no new story. It dates back at least to Britain’s Peel Commission of the 1930s, which recommended two states in Palestine, one for Jews, one for Arabs – a notion that Palestinians summarily rejected.

Rejectionism was the ideological fuel behind the Palestinian Liberation Organization even during the Oslo years, it drives the terrorist group Hamas (which rules Gaza) and it prevents the supposedly moderate Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas from taking concrete steps toward peace, as witnessed by his refusal to respond to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent settlement freeze in the West Bank.

Conventional wisdom blames Jerusalem for the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, but common sense suggests otherwise. A Palestinian leadership that rejects the very idea of a Jewish-majority Israel, that has rejected every reasonable peace offer (including the generous Clinton framework) and that has done nothing to prepare its people for the assumed end point – two nations living side by side in peace – won’t make peace. Period.

Third, Tehran might welcome better relations with Washington. Virtually every president since Jimmy Carter has sought the right mix of sticks and carrots to entice Tehran into a rapprochement with Washington. Failing that, every administration has sought entrée to moderates within the regime who might nudge it in this direction.

The regime has never been interested, for anti-Americanism is deeply embedded within its ideological DNA. Through its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps or through its terrorist clients, Tehran has killed hundreds of Americans over the years and it is killing more today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Neither promises of greater global acceptance nor threats of global isolation will push Tehran off its current nuclear-seeking, terrorist-sponsoring, regional mischief-making course. Only the requisite pressure that gives the clerical leaders a clear choice – change direction or face policies that will threaten your hold on power – could do so.

Fourth, Damascus could split with Tehran. What’s metaphysically possible is not necessarily realistic. U.S. efforts to push Syria toward the West and away from Iran, and to convince it to

make peace with Israel, have proved no more successful with Bashar al-Assad in Damascus than they did under his father.

If anything, evidence is mounting that Damascus is cementing its ties to Tehran and the terrorists they jointly support. Earlier this year, al-Assad mocked the most recent U.S. outreach to him by holding high-profile meetings with Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas' Khaled Meshaal.

More ominously, he has refused meetings with international inspectors over the undeclared nuclear facility that Israel bombed in late 2007, continues to ease passage for terrorists into Iraq where they attack U.S. forces, is training terrorists to use surface-to-air missiles, and, according to U.S. and Israeli officials, recently sent long-range Scud missiles to Hezbollah that put Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Israel's nuclear installations with range of attack.

The record is clear. Conventional wisdom about the Middle East, propagated and repeatedly reinforced by America's foreign policy establishment, is an intellectual house of cards, one that has collapsed under every recent U.S. president.

We need a new framework through which to see the region. To construct it, we might try opening our eyes to the actual record of recent decades and to the history of militant Islam that dates back further – both of which prove decisively that the tenets on which we have acted bear little resemblance to reality.

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