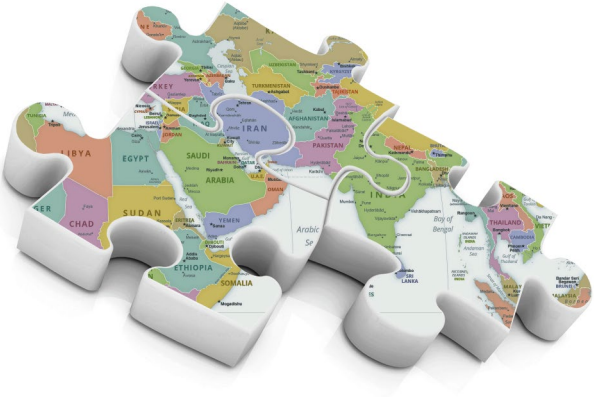

Regime Change No More:
Coming to Terms with the Greater Middle East

HENRIK LARSEN

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Regime Change No More:
Coming to Terms with the Greater Middle East

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> The damage to Western integrity may not be irreparable if there is a sober reckoning about what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how to rectify policy going forward

To move on to other challenges to transatlantic security with a sense of integrity, the United States and its NATO allies must come to grips with their failed regime change agenda over the past 20 years that ended with the farcical retreat from Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the first of their interventions in the Greater Middle East since 2001, alongside Iraq, Libya, and Syria, that obscured the pursuit of realistic objectives and prioritised (liberal) ideals that proved to be detached from the local realities.

That US and NATO interventions were based not only on flawed assumptions about the wider region but also on misinformation in some cases does not help to maintain public trust. Recent revelations about the Afghanistan campaign[1] as well as NATO's official 'lessons learned'[2] raise doubt about the readiness of Western bureaucracies and militaries to face the fundamental problems behind their mission failures. Yet, the damage to Western integrity may not be irreparable if there is a sober reckoning about what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how to rectify policy going forward.

This paper argues that the United States and NATO need to define answers to these crucial questions as part of their reorientation process. Their first step is to acknowledge that the interventions left them worse off in their preference-ranking of regime types: (1) secular democracy, (2) secular autocracy, (3) Islamist theocracy, and (4) civil war. Their second step is to reach an understanding that the removal of central power unleashed internal struggles

so powerful that they threatened to tear countries apart. Their third step is to adopt extreme restraint as a policy toward the wider region in anticipation of future interventionist temptations and significant establishment inertia.

The United States and NATO at a Critical Juncture

It is not too much to say that Afghanistan has left the United States and NATO at a post-Cold War critical juncture. Their interventions ended up as costly disasters, regardless of whether they took post-conflict roles or whether they provided direct or indirect support.[3] In describing the declining Western enthusiasm for interventions over the past 20 years, it makes sense to distinguish between four phases as a basis for reassessing past and current policy toward the Greater Middle East.

They first phase coincides with the so-called 'unipolar moment', which gave rise to the objective of somehow both revolutionising and stabilising the Middle East. The United States entered Afghanistan in 2001 to hunt senior al-Qaeda leaders but, assisted by NATO, quickly ended up extending its responsibility to nation-building.[4] The United States took its nation-building conviction with it into Iraq after toppling the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, in the hope of setting free a vibrant civil society and remaking the Middle East.[5]

The second phase occurred when widespread violence overwhelmed nation-building efforts. The United States conducted a counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq in 2007, only to see the country descend into sectarian conflict in 2013 and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) expand with unprecedented brutality even by Middle East standards.[6] Iraq's implosion allowed Iran to establish itself as a regional power. In Afghanistan, the United States and NATO similarly engaged in counterinsurgency from 2009 onward without achieving strategic gain against the Taliban and without allowing the intended transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan government.

The third phase occurred in the context of the Arab Spring, when NATO air bombardments in Libya effectively removed Muammar Gaddafi after he threatened a bloody retaliation against rebels in the country. The idealists in the Obama administration won the debate in favour of intervening,[7] and France wanted to make up for its perceived diplomatic failure during the Arab Spring, notably in Tunisia.[8] However, the negative experience of Afghanistan and Iraq made NATO unwilling to put troops on the ground in yet another theatre. Soon enough, Libya fell apart in a civil war between two parties, thus adding to the list of failed interventions.

The fourth phase centred on the Syrian Civil War. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France were on the verge of intervening in 2013 but were held

back by domestic opposition and the possibility of Russian mediation, after which they resorted to lethal and non-lethal assistance to the anti-Assad rebel groups.[9] However, the subsequent rise of ISIS and Russia's military intervention to stabilise the Assad regime made the Western demand of its ousting futile.[10] Western support of rebels seems to have achieved little other than prolonging the civil war.

"No kind of military, economic, or diplomatic intervention proved capable of making a lasting positive difference in any of the Middle Eastern theatres"

Step #1: Getting Priorities Straight

The United States and its NATO allies find themselves in a new and fifth phase of soul searching after the embarrassing withdrawal from Afghanistan, whose army collapsed like a house of cards in front of the numerically and materially inferior Taliban. No kind of military, economic, or diplomatic intervention proved capable of making a lasting positive difference in any of the Middle Eastern theatres. The first step out of the bewilderment is for the United States and NATO to go back to the drawing board to rank their regime-type preferences as a basis for an evaluation of their original intentions against the final outcomes:

1. Secular democracy
2. Secular autocracy
3. Islamist theocracy
4. Civil war

Western countries' first preference is for secular democracy, their own form of government characterised by free elections and widespread liberal and women's rights. Their second preference is for secular autocracy, which meets the West's preference for neither free elections nor liberal rights but does meet their preference for separating religion from politics and for (at least nominal) gender equality. They have a third preference for Islamist theocracy, due to its suppression of liberal and women's rights and because of the rigidity of religious conviction in both domestic and international conflict. They have a fourth and last preference

> Over the past two decades, the United States and NATO unintentionally acted against their own interests and values

for civil war, due the human suffering, renewed refugee and migration flows, and risk of conflict spilling over to other countries it entails. Tragically, none of the interventions have met Western objectives but only exacerbated local instability.

In Afghanistan, the United States and NATO initially wanted to elevate an Islamist theocracy to a secular democracy. After two decades, they achieved no more than an illegitimate and corrupt government.[11] Nation-building proved to be an effort almost completely dependent on the United States and NATO, after which the country re-descended into an Islamic theocracy in control of the country's entire territory. In Iraq, the initial ambition to elevate a secular autocracy to a secular democracy failed badly and descended into civil war, requiring further intervention to stabilise the country. Saddam Hussein's own long record of brutality could hardly have matched the estimated 200,000 Iraqis directly killed by war-related violence in the country since 2003.[12]

In Libya, there was no doubt that Gaddafi ruled his country with an iron fist, but bombing his secular autocracy into demise did not bring about the widespread hopes of democracy in the context of the Arab Spring. Instead, it threw the country into long-lasting civil war and allowed ISIS to gain a foothold. As for Syria, Western countries were not responsible for the outbreak of the civil war, but they did oppose the secular Assad regime, only to de facto give up that policy in the face of ISIS seeking to establish an Islamic theocracy in the region. The complexity of the Syrian Civil War raises doubt about whether the United States ended up supporting so-called moderate rebels and not ISIS and al-Qaeda collaborators.[13]

Over the past two decades, the United States and NATO unintentionally acted against their own interests and values. It was hard to tolerate the Middle Eastern strongmen, but the alternative was civil war and militant Islamism. It was similarly hard to leave Afghanistan behind with an Islamic

theocracy after hunting terrorists linked to the 9/11 attacks, but it proved futile to replace it. Acknowledging these failures is a first step that must lead the United States and NATO to the second step of trying to reach an understanding why that was so.

Step #2: Reckoning Internal Struggles

If 20 years of Middle East policy shows anything, it is the triumph of local over external forces and the predominance of ethnic, religious, and tribal structures over other forms of collective identity. States whose borders were drawn by the British, French, and Ottoman Empires across such lines of division were obviously not analogous to Japan, Germany, or Central and Eastern Europe, which the United States and NATO have successfully transformed in the past. Under this circumstance, the destruction of central power, whether secular or theocratic, unleashed internal struggles so strong that they threatened to tear countries apart and rendered nation building a near-impossible undertaking.

The intervention in Afghanistan should stand for a first and major scrutiny of how policy could be out of touch with reality, despite so many years of intelligence-gathering on the ground. A convincing place to start is by acknowledging that the narrative of fighting oppressors of the Afghan people neglected the Taliban's ethnic base and growing ability to build legitimacy throughout the country.[14] If the imposition of Western-style elections has shown one thing it is that in the ballot boxes, Afghans identify not only with their own ethnicity but also against others.[15] The Taliban leadership and core fighting force consists almost exclusively of Pashtuns, the country's largest ethnic group, who traditionally sought to preserve their position at the top of national power. This in turn generated changing webs of counter-coalitions among the other major ethnic groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras).[16] The Taliban refrained from sectarian attacks and was successful in building legitimacy through the provision of security and Islam-based social justice throughout much of the country. Over time, they proved a viable alternative to the corrupt and ineffective US/NATO-supported government in Kabul.[17]

As for Iraq, the country disintegrated into warring entities with the disappearance of Saddam Hussein's autocratic power.[18] The divide between the majority Shias and the minority Sunnis flared up because of free elections and the disbanding of the Baathist security forces.[19] The Shias gained the power they were bereft of under Saddam Hussein, in turn leading to the marginalisation of the Sunnis. The Shia–Sunni divide is crucial to explaining why the country was thrown into political chaos and sectarian violence supported by Iran, which in turn explains why ISIS could find appeal among embittered Sunnis.[20] The religious allegiances co-exist with the tribal societies throughout the country,

which hold their own customary law and sources of political legitimacy.[21] Even in the absence of armed conflict, Baghdad has little leverage in the face of consolidated provincial power, tribal distrust, and militias with ties to foreign powers, especially Iran.

The Libya insurrection had many fault lines from the beginning, between tribes and communities enriched by Gaddafi's rule and those marginalised by it.[22] The country's newly elected leadership solidified factionalism and proved unable to bring the different militias with diverging loyalties and regional affiliations under its control.[23] Increased terrorising of military officials, police officers, and judges in the eastern town of Benghazi gave a groundswell to General Khalifa Haftar, a Gaddafi-era military official who vowed to bring his troops to Tripoli and unify the country under his command.[24] What followed was the effective division of Libya into two rival governments: one in the east, allied with Haftar, and one in Tripoli, backed by Islamist militias and militias from the west of the country.

As for Syria, the civil war grew out of discontent with the Assad regime and escalated to a bloody armed conflict after the regime violently suppressed protestors calling for its removal. A secular but nominally Shia (Alawite) dictator supported by Shia militias stood opposed to rebels consisting of militant Sunni Islamists like ISIS and al-Nusra, as well as non-Islamists including the Free Syrian Army. At its height, the civil war threatened to fragment the Syrian state, with more than half of the population forcibly displaced.[25] The hostilities developed into a proxy war between foreign powers, where Russia emerged victorious in securing the Assad regime's survival.

If the United States and NATO interventions have confirmed anything it is the predominance of non-national loyalties, which breaks with their previous assumptions about what constitutes a state. The removal of autocratic or theocratic central power made moral sense but set free ethnic and religious forces so unpredictable and destructive that they could not control them afterward. State cohesion under this circumstance is a matter of coercive state capacity, but no Western power was able or willing to permanently or even temporarily play that role. This brings the United States and NATO to the third and final step in their reorientation, namely a fundamental policy change to prevent the repetition of past mistakes.

Step #3: Adopting Extreme Restraint

War and conflict in the Greater Middle East will continue to tempt Western countries to intervene economically, diplomatically, or militarily. They can never be completely neutral because of the resulting humanitarian crises, the repercussions for world trade and oil supplies, and their wider security implications. The four intervention

theatres, however, make the case for extreme restraint to tame future temptations on behalf of the Greater Middle East. They need to base policy on the circumstances, rather than being under the illusion that they can change them for the better.

Afghanistan is a *fait accompli*, with the Taliban having transitioned from an insurgency into a government.[26] Lacking the funds for a functioning state, for buying off power brokers, and now even to feed the population, the Taliban may not be able to keep the entire country under its control. The situation is similar to the erosion of ethnic-tribal support when the Soviet subsidies dried up in 1992 (risk of civil war).[27] The United States and NATO cannot outright support an Islamic theocracy that so many of their own soldiers died fighting, although they seem aware that a national emirate after all is preferable to ISIS as a global jihadist organisation.[28]

Iraq's fragility nourishes fear about the consequences of the withdrawal of US combat troops from the country, which was completed by the end of 2021.[29] If armed groups again mobilise, will the US-trained forces run away, as they did in 2014 when ISIS overran Mosul and when the United States left Afghanistan?[30] Tragically, Iraq's ethnic and religious fragmentation perpetuates the country's fragility and deep infiltration by Iran, with no prospect of regaining its former shape as a country.[31]

Libya so far has been unable to hold national elections but could easily plunge back into conflict if one of the two warring sides (and their proxy sponsors) does not see itself adequately represented in a future power sharing.[32] Western countries disagree on which side to support. Collectively, they would however do service to their credibility not by hiding, but by voicing their preference for the formation of a secular government that is able to reduce irregular migration leaving from the Libyan shores, curtail the power of militias, and fight militant Islamists seeking opportunities to regroup in the country.

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Syria is a *fait accompli*, and history may judge that Russia served the West's own interest at a time when its interventionist proponents had incoherent expectations about what could replace the Assad regime, notably overlooking the prospect of militant Islamism.[33] The likelihood of Assad's recognition is growing over time, with the United States increasingly unwilling to enforce Syria's isolation,[34] the Gulf Arab states re-engaging,[35] and the European countries wishing to repatriate people deemed to no longer require refugee protection with the improvement of the security situation in the country.

Other parts of the Middle East seem to confirm the rule that tolerating repressive regimes, whether secular or theocratic and however painful that may be from a moral perspective, is preferable to the risk of civil war. The West, for the sake of its own reputation and self-image, can distance itself from the autocrats and theocrats through a more honest public display of its interests and values and how they diverge. For instance, the West should be critical of Saudi Arabia, which exercises theocratic control over its population and allows the nurturing of Sunni extremism inside its borders (including the 9/11 terrorists), but it should also recognise the country's overall value as an ally in the region. The West should be equally critical about Egypt's human rights abuses, but also recognise the military dictatorship as an ally against militant Islamism in North Africa, a protector of the Christian minority, and a guarantor of peace with Israel.[36]

The disappointment about what counterinsurgency can achieve gives serious cause for reflection for France, which intervened in Mali in 2013 to prevent an armed Islamist takeover and which faces growing religious extremism throughout the Sahel. It is worth noting in this context that the destruction of the ISIS caliphate had nothing to do with winning the hearts and minds of a population, but rather collaborating with local forces and adversarial groups for its containment and destruction. France withdrew some of its forces in 2021 but its attachment to its former colony makes it unlikely that it would leave in an Afghanistan-like scenario.

Ideological Inertia

The reorientation of US and NATO strategy after the mission failures in the Greater Middle East is like a supertanker that takes decades to change course. It is telling that subsequent political leaders wanting to unwind themselves from Afghanistan failed to do so. President Barack Obama came into office in 2009 wanting to focus on 'nation building at home' and yet followed his generals' advice to escalate the war that would drag on another 13 years. President Donald Trump was elected on the even more emphatic promise to end the wars in

the Middle East but was similarly persuaded to conduct a 'small surge', which only further postponed the inevitable and left the withdrawal to his successor.[37]

It is also telling that the responsible decision makers such as George W. Bush,[38] Condoleezza Rice,[39] Tony Blair,[40] and Anders Fogh Rasmussen[41] today show no sign of regret about past policy. Rather, they believe the West has not been patient enough in the defence of liberal values and that the failures were primarily a matter of execution. Similarly, the foreign policy establishment, including think tanks and NGOs, today does not seem prepared for a revision of Western policy that would entail admitting that past assumptions about democratisation and stabilisation in the Greater Middle East context were fundamentally flawed.[42]

Historically, it is normal for a hegemonic power to develop a self-serving idea of exceptionalism when it predominates and to cling to it when it declines. A healthy hegemon, on the other hand, is one that can absorb an external shock into its policy processes by acknowledging past mistakes, including the loss of blood and treasure, to move on with a new sense of mission, even if that is inward-focused. The undoubtedly correct narrative that political illegitimacy throughout the Greater Middle East fuels domestic instability and external aggression must now be checked by the equally correct counter-narrative that external interference is likely to make matters much worse. The critical juncture of the withdrawal from Afghanistan is a chance for the current generation of Western decision makers, who are personally less vested in past foreign policy, to break through.

This year NATO will adopt a new Strategic Concept to define its direction through 2030 and beyond, which is the right first place to remedy transatlantic strategy. Although the Concept will have to balance the eastward-oriented collective defence and southward-oriented

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counterterrorism and capacity building, it can hardly ignore NATO allies' aversion to new interventions on their southern periphery.[43] For the sake of strategic clarity about its current and future mission, NATO may wish to drop crisis management as one of its existing 'core tasks' and refocus on the growing competition with Russia and China with clearer military-political priorities and defence guidance. History may judge that the only true 'liberal exceptionalism' was the luxury of wasting excessive amounts of treasure on distant frontiers without going bankrupt or endangering the national interest. With Western taxpayers no longer feeling the responsibility for quagmires, it falls to the current generation of leaders to steer firmly away from them. ■

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Coming to Terms with the Greater Middle East

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Reflecting on the 'farcical retreat from Afghanistan' back in August 2021, Henrik Larsen discusses the need for a reckoning within US foreign policy and that of its NATO Allies. To focus on the other challenges to transatlantic security with a sense of integrity, these states must come to grips with their failed regime change agenda over the past 20 years. Afghanistan was the first of their interventions in the Greater Middle East since 2001, alongside Iraq, Libya, and Syria, that obscured the pursuit of realistic objectives and prioritised (liberal) ideals that proved to be detached from the local realities. In the wake of NATO's new Strategic Concept for 2030 and beyond, this strategic update seeks to analyse the options for policy in the Middle East going forward.