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Beyond 'The War on Terror': Prospects for the Middle East and North Africa

I should like to begin my remarks this evening with a quotation from a famous telegram sent by George F. Kennan from Moscow in 1946. Although he was referring to the policies to be adopted by the United States towards the Soviet Union, this remark still seems particularly apt some sixty-two years later. In concluding what had proved to be a very lengthy comment on the nature and attitudes of the Stalinist state, he said:

Finally we must have courage and self-confidence to cling to our own methods and conceptions of human society. After all, the greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet Communism is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.¹

The comment seems relevant today for, if we replace 'Soviet Communism' by 'Islamic terrorism', the statement captures very precisely the great flaw behind the 'War on Terror' or, as we are now to call it, the 'Long War.' In essence, American policy towards the Middle East and North Africa during this decade – and to a much lesser extent European policy, too – has been dominated by a belief in an existential and systemic threat emanating from the region which can only be countered, because of its immediacy and severity, by abandoning much of the principle and practice of diplomatic engagement in the past. Instead, the brutal application of military force and diplomatic threat, together with cultural and political arrogance, has become the principle that has guided our response,

a principle subsumed within the catchphrase of the 'War on Terror'.

Today, as we approach the end of the second Bush administration, with a new administration in the offing next January, and as the 'credit crunch' further undermines what has been the world's sole hyper-power for the past two decades, there is a general view that, somehow, the 'War on Terror' is also coming to an end and that a new dispensation will inform our policies towards the Middle East and North Africa. I am not convinced that this is so, at least in terms of the foreign policy platforms of the candidates for presidential office. Indeed, I even wonder if such a dispensation is possible or conceivable in the intellectual and policy planning environment that has been created since September 11, 2001, if not long before.

And, even if it were possible, I wonder how the West – Europe and the United States – could meaningfully engage with the Arab World, Iran and Afghanistan in ways that would counter the negative and damaging initiatives undertaken as part of the 'War on Terror' over the last eight years. After all, to adopt new policies would mean understanding where the failures lie in the past and that, in part, depends on being able to articulate what they were. Yet, one of the most striking features of recent years has been how the vocabulary of international politics has changed and how, in the midst of their defeat in Iraq, the neo-conservatives and assertive nationalists who have dominated the policy scene, have succeeded in imposing a new political vocabulary upon us. And that, in turn, limits debate and obscures

key issues so that it is questionable whether it is still possible to counter the hegemonic discourse that informs the 'War on Terror'.

If this is true, then we face a profound problem of identifying what the objective situation really is. Instead we run the danger that we shall continue to construct an image that resonates to our prejudices and preferences and that this will, in turn, reinforce that hegemonic discourse, generating a world of perpetual confrontation. Individuals, of course, are not necessarily trapped in this 'cloud of unknowing' but the mass media and mainstream politicians increasingly seem to have bought the neo-conservative package such that the external relations of Western states with the Middle East and North Africa are dominated by a securitised vision of threat that has achieved the status of a myth. In such circumstances, any hope of moving beyond the 'War on Terror' is itself a mythological undertaking! Yet, if this is my position, I owe it to you to examine these issues in greater detail, to see whether or not my pessimism is justified and what the implications of this will be for the short-to-medium term.

The American vision

We should, perhaps, recall that the first Bush administration began its period in office with an assumption that its primary concerns would be with domestic policy. Throughout the electoral campaign, the president-to-be had consistently played down the importance of foreign policy, particularly with the Middle East,

apart from the ritual obeisance to Israel and a personalised attack on Iraq. Even after he entered office, the new president showed little sense of urgency over the issues that had so exercised the Clinton administration in its dying days, particularly that of trans-national violence and international terrorism.

It was only with the attacks of September 11, 2001 that this policy vacuum was suddenly filled. The incidents were to prove to be the catalyst that also resolved a latent conflict within the new administration, whereby the neo-conservatives within it – many of them former democrats from pre-Reagan days who had bemoaned the lack of muscularity in American foreign policy in projecting national interest and the democratic project abroad – were able to suddenly gain prominence alongside the old assertive nationalists of the Republican Party. With startling speed, the two groups fashioned a coherent policy based on the ideas of democratic peace and pre-emptive intervention as a means of removing the canker of violence from the Middle East. In addition, as part of the process of ensuring domestic support in the confusion created by the attacks, they mobilised the concept proposed by Leo Strauss of the 'noble myth', exploiting the concept of Islam-based trans-national terrorism as a systemic and existential threat to the American ideal, in a manner reminiscent of communism and the Cold War.

It was against this intellectual background that the attack on Afghanistan was executed and the subsequent invasion of Iraq was to be justified. As part of this process,

not only was the regime of Saddam Hussain erroneously and deliberately alleged to be involved in supporting Islamic terrorism, but Israel was reified as the democratic model that the Middle East and North Africa would eventually have to emulate. In reality, of course, the Bush administration soon forgot about democratic peace, opting instead for regional security, whatever the political complexions of the regimes that guaranteed it.

Even more important, perhaps, the 'noble myth' of a systemic and exis-

“The “noble myth” of a systemic and existential threat from politicised Islam became the justification for the construction of the “War on Terror””

tential threat from politicised Islam became the justification for the construction of the 'War on Terror', itself profoundly pre-emptive in nature with its demands for military and security cooperation from other states. In the Mediterranean, in particular, few regimes objected as the pressure on them for political reform ebbed away, even if they feared the outcome of the American intervention in Iraq. Even Saudi Arabia soon overcame American antagonism engendered by the fact that the majority of those

responsible for the attacks had come from the Kingdom whose Wahhabist religion was seen, quite erroneously, to have been responsible for the extremism that they had imbued. Domestically, of course, its counterpart was the suspension of individual rights and liberties – through the feverish search for ‘Homeland security’ and, subsequently, through Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and ‘special rendition’.

What has been striking, to me at least, has been the way in which these new principles governing American security and foreign policy have continued vitality in the United States today, despite the failures in Iraq and the growing crisis with Iran. Indeed, they have even been imported into Europe too, although given Europe’s belief in itself as a ‘normative power’, they have been couched somewhat differently. Here we worry – with good reason, in view of the attacks on Madrid and London, given the fact that the Middle East and North Africa are part of our southern periphery – about Islamised violence imported through migration and political asylum or through the contacts between the continent’s Muslim minority communities and their countries-of-origin. European policy towards the Mediterranean has, as a result, been profoundly securitised and the European tradition of critical engagement has been, in effect, abandoned. As with Washington, European capitals soon abandoned any dream of engendering democratic governance for the sake of supporting regimes that ensured security, whatever the price.

Yet, along with this change in diplomatic practice and international engagement came the introduction

of a new diplomatic and political vocabulary, based on novel assumptions about the nature of the ‘threat’. Its effects were particularly notable in the Anglo-American discourse where the idea of al-Qa’ida as a massive informal network of focussed hostility, dreaming of challenging Western values and overthrowing them to install a universal caliphate captured the popular imagination, significant portions of the commentariat and the conservative political elites as well. For Frank Gaffney, for example – admittedly on the far right but not without considerable support – quite apart from the violent extremists, the Islamic world is now engaged in what he calls ‘soft jihad’ to impose ‘shari’a’ on the Western world. Tony Blair repeatedly warned of the threat to ‘our values and our way-of-life’ from Islamic extremism, conveniently ignoring that the discourse of even extremist jihad is explicitly defensive in nature in terms of strategy, even if – like the Bush administration and its supporters – it also believes in pre-emptive action as a tactic.

Even if politicians decry the idea that Islam in some politicised form or other is in itself the threat, media reporting of the endless arrests and trials for terrorism reinforce the implicit message that it is, that it is the driver for the violence that forces us to accept restrictions on our liberties and the excesses of security and securitised legislation. The same is true in the United States, even though there has been no incident of political violence linked to Islam since 2001. Demotic discourse has, in short, been securitised too and these linguistic habits spill over into mainstream political

discourse as well. Once that has happened, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish a meaningful dialogue or discourse over the real quantum and nature of threat simply because the political vocabulary has been impoverished by what has become a new and hegemonic debate over security and little else.

In fact, this is not entirely new. Indeed, it could be argued that this has been part of Western discursive traditions reaching back to the First World War and even beyond. Noble myths, after all, have always been abundant, both in promoting fear and in reinforcing superiority in both the European colonial and the American foreign policy traditions – whether in terms of 'lesser breeds without the law' or 'manifest destiny' or whether it involves fear of the unknown, such as the 'great communist conspiracy' or the 'missile gap'. They develop and respond to real threats, even if they deliberately exaggerate them for the sake of guaranteeing public support for government, or even to discipline the public into such support. And 'international terrorism' alongside the 'Soviet threat' has played an indispensable role in this respect.

As David Rapoport has pointed out², international terrorism, itself the product of the development of mass communications in the nineteenth century, has been with us for the past 125 years. There have been four successive waves, he argues, each informed by a universalistic ideology and each lasting for about forty years – anarchism, nationalism and national liberation, the 'New Left' and now religious extremism. Jeffrey Kaplan³ has added a fifth variant that can co-exist with the others; a

chiliastic, inwardly-directed vision of remaking tribal and national societies through violence, beginning with the Khmer Rouge and including the Lords Resistance Army in Uganda and the Janjaweed in Sudan. And there is no doubt that they have had their effects on Western diplomatic paradigms. Here is President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901, for example:

Anarchy is a crime against the whole human race and all mankind should band together against the Anarchist. His crimes should be made a crime against the law of nations...declared by treaties among all civilized powers.

For our purposes, ironically enough, the particular noble myth that now informs the 'War on Terror' and the supposed Islamist threat from the Middle East and North Africa finds its origins in the way in which President Woodrow Wilson shaped the Versailles peace treaty at the end of the First World War. Alongside self-determination, democratic governance, with its extension 'democratic peace' first made an implicit appearance. Even though his intervention in the pragmatic, self-interested victors' vengeance that characterised the French and British approach in the negotiations is universally seen as a statement about disinterested engagement in establishing a world order, it had about it the whiff of the Monroe Doctrine as well as a self-righteous sense of the ordering of the world!

This, of course, highlighted the essentially moral assumptions that have always been behind American foreign policy, despite its profoundly realist nature and usual practice.

It is, in some sense, the obverse of domestic policy which, in essence, is governed by the Constitution and the assumptions about liberty that surround it – John Winthrop’s ‘city upon the hill’ recast by Ronald Reagan as the famous ‘shining city upon the hill.’ And it was this that the neo-conservative movement originally picked up when former New York Trotskyists allied with Jacksonian Democrats in the 1970s and 1980s. This moral sense was given explicit form by Francis Fukuyama in his famous 1989 article, ‘The end of history?’, even if he has now renounced his former allegiance to the neo-conservatives themselves. Its realist parallel – the domain of the assertive nationalists such as Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney – was captured by Samuel Huntington four years later in his warning of the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ – a perfect paradigm for the perpetual existential Islamist threat.

It is this discourse, too, that Britain, in particular, has adopted. It reinforces the populist demotic variant of the threat to ‘our way-of-life’, creating that ‘cloud of unknowing’ and impoverished vocabulary that now informs debate throughout society and the media and rendering any objective analysis of the dialectic between the West and the Islamic world intensely difficult, if not impossible, in policy terms. In the United States, perhaps the most important manifestation of this emerges from the programmes of the two presidential candidates and their vice-presidential nominees in the run-up to the elections on November 4, 2008. The most surprising feature of the programmes they have proposed is that they differ so little.

Both unconditionally support Israel, thereby ignoring the most crucial of all problems inside the Middle East dimension. The same is true of their vice-presidential partners, although for Sarah Palin this is probably far more a matter of her Christian evangelism than of considered policy analysis. Over Iraq, in reality, the distinctions between the positions of Barak Obama and John McCain are minimal – one proposes a partial but substantial withdrawal over sixteen months and the other a withdrawal in terms of prevailing conditions. Both demand that Iran be brought to heel and neither is prepared to renounce the military option, although John McCain is more willing to use it than is Barak Obama who offers engagement with Iran instead. And, over Islamic terrorism neither offers more than a continuation of the confrontations of the past, with, in the case of Barak Obama, a promise of far greater military engagement in Afghanistan.

It is thus difficult to see that any meaningful change to the ‘War on Terror’ can be expected, especially since neither has proposed any real change in the domestic arena to the provisions for homeland security. Ironically enough, however, even though we may no longer be able to conceive of an alternative way forward, the effectiveness of the ‘War on Terror’ is also widely questioned. A BBC poll⁴, published on September 29, 2008 and based on information gathered from more than 24,000 people in 23 countries between July and September reveals that 29 per cent of respondents believe that it has had no effect and a further 30 per cent felt that it had strengthened al-

Qa'ida. Almost half the respondents (49 per cent) felt that neither side in the war was winning, whilst 22 per cent – 34 per cent in the United States – believed that the United States had gained the upper hand but only 10 per cent thought that its adversary was winning. In Egypt, 60 per cent of respondents approved of al-Qa'ida and in Pakistan – another key state in the war – only 19 per cent of respondents had a negative view of the movement. The poll was hardly a ringing endorsement of the policy!

Indeed, the evidence of recent years would seem to back up this conclusion:

- Despite the apparent victory against al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Sunni Islamist violence is rife in Mosul and now appears to be creeping back into Baghdad and its surrounding regions, being restrained only by the Sahwa movement – former al-Qa'ida supporters whose loyalty to the Iraqi government is contingent upon integration into the Iraqi security forces – something Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is determined to avoid!
- In Afghanistan, NATO and American forces face an ever widening circle of Taliban violence – of a kind akin to Jeffrey Kaplan's 'Fifth Wave' – rather than the virtuous circle of reconstruction they had anticipated. NATO commanders now anticipate a ten-year-long commitment and the United States intends to boost its force levels by 30,000 men.
- Now the failure to destroy the al-Qa'ida leadership has led to direct intervention in Pakistan, thus alienating Pakistani pub-

lic opinion which has become ferociously anti-American.

Confidentially, Western military leaders are speaking of the collapse of Peshawar to Taliban forces by the end of this year.

- In Europe, the frequency with which terrorist plots are uncovered accelerates but the threat does not apparently diminish, being fed by alienation and frustration amongst isolated minority communities facing economic and social discrimination.
- In North Africa, phoenix-like, the Algerian civil war seems to be on the edge of being rekindled amidst anger over rising consumer costs and governmental incompetence. Morocco faces similar dangers as IMF- and Western-led liberalisation fails to generate trickle-down prosperity.
- Only, perhaps, in South-East Asia could there have been said to have been some success but, even there, the situation in Thailand and the Philippines remains uncertain.

This recital of failure, of course, is not admitted in Western capitals as being a consequence of misplaced policy. Instead the indigenous threat is mythologised and exaggerated into a global and malevolent conspiracy that challenges Enlightenment values and Western rationalism. Yet a large part of this failure resides in our inability to generate an objective and realistic analysis of the problems that we face and an unawareness of the history that informs them. Instead we persist in securitising the symptoms and militarising our responses to them, whilst resolutely ignoring the underlying causes.

Yet, overall, it seems that the 'War on Terror' has demonstrated the ineffectiveness of military means in dealing with international terrorism, in whatever form it may manifest itself. And there is little evidence that our leaders are prepared or are able to abandon its principles and strategies, or that the publics to whom they have to resonate would wish them to do so, largely because of the 'noble myths' that have now become orthodox explanations within our hegemonic security discourse.

the United States throughout the Middle East, so we must assume that, at some level, the military strategies already in place continue. However, we might reasonably assume that the means by which they are fulfilled alter, involving far more local input and far less reliance on brute force. In the wider field of a strategy against trans-national violence, the incumbent may well decide to learn from Europe's far longer experience with terrorism and national liberation, relying instead on intelligence and effective policing rather than on military force. And, inevitably, the appalling trappings of deliberate abuse of individual rights and liberties articulated through the power of the state by the Bush administration will have to be swept away.

All of this, however, only addresses the symptoms of the crisis that the 'War-on-Terror' was supposed to address, none of it deals with the causes – many of which long predate the attacks of September 11, 2001. A new president, if he is to create a meaningful engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, will also have to design policies to address such causes, even if domestic imperatives will tie his hands over many of them. The first requirement he will face will be to shrink trans-national violence down from the terrifying proportions into which it has been conflated by the impoverished discourse of the neo-conservatives and their allies to something which responds to its true dimensions in international affairs. Yet, given the impoverishment of the political discourse over the past decade and the widespread consensus it has achieved, it is questionable whether or not he will be able to build

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Alternatives

Yet, as Senator Obama has demanded, in the *leitmotiv* to his campaign, the American people – and, by extension, people everywhere, certainly in Europe – need 'change'. So, let us suppose that the new president, whoever he may be, actually does question the utility and the morality of the 'War on Terror' and begins to clear the Augean stables of international affairs from the detritus left by his predecessor. Of course, he will not be able to ignore the manifestations of violence that now confront

a domestic constituency for reversing the 'noble myths' of the past, although the degree of disbelief currently evinced by Americans suggests that he might be kicking at an open door!

Once again, it is a question of degree and proportion for it is undeniable that threats linked to trans-national violence do exist. But then, as David Rapoport has shown us, they always have and it is the duty of government to both counter them and ensure that public concern is based on objective evaluation of the danger. Although Europe faces a special and specific problem over the anger now entrenched within its minority communities which does represent a real threat to public order and social stability, this is not true of the United States. Perhaps reining in on 'homeland security' might reduce domestic hysteria and improve the social environment instead. De-securing the foreign policy process might also play a very useful part in this, both within the West and in the Middle East and North Africa.

In reality, of course, the true domain for trans-national and national violence lies inside the Muslim world itself, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. And there, the role of trans-national violence is miniscule compared with the threat of national violence stimulated by illegitimate, authoritarian government and economic deprivation. Repression and deprivation of the burgeoning populations of the region have proved to be two of the main drivers for the violence of recent years and here a new American president could do much to reduce their effect. It is a great pity that Western attempts at modifying the practices of regional

governments in the past have been so contaminated by their confusion with more immediate Western concerns, leading to the widespread conviction there of Western connivance in indigenous repression. Condoleezza Rice's promises of Western support for democracy, rather than stability, in June 2005 rang hollow in the face of failures of such support in Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt.

Yet the United States will have to demonstrate, as will Europe in its more diminished domain of the Mediterranean, that it is sincere and disinterested in its attempts to encourage democratic governance – in forms that are consonant with local political cultures – as part of the process of rolling back terrorism. And, as part of that process, it will have to address the economic agenda too. Over the past year, Middle Eastern and North African anger has grown in direct proportion to increases in energy costs and in the price of food. Neither is solely the responsibility of the West, of course, but Western speculators and the production of bio-fuels have played their part, a part profoundly expanded by the trade liberalisation agenda pushed by both the United States and the European Union in the face of the failure of the World Trade Organisation's Doha Round of trade negotiations in recent years. And beyond that, too, there have been the failed policies of economic restructuring pushed for the past three decades by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. There has been, as Cecil Woodham-Smith⁵ wrote of the Irish famine, a 'terrible want of kindness' over Western prescriptions for economic revival in the region, quite apart from the fact that they have not worked.

These generic changes in policy approaches towards the region will, however, take place in very different circumstances from those that obtained at the beginning of this decade. Then the United States did enjoy the 'unit-polar moment' and it was possible to talk of hegemonic stability created by the world's sole hyper-power, even if the New World Order enunciated by President Bush's father in January 1991 had proved to be a chimera. Now, however, the world looks very different. Not only has the United States profoundly weakened itself by its engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention subsidiary commitments in Somalia, the Sahara and the Sahel through its new AFRICOM military command which is responsible for African security and for countering terrorist infiltration there, or in the Caucasus. It is also significantly weakened by the global energy crisis and, latterly by the financial crisis too. In other words, its ability to project and sustain force is significantly and increasingly impaired and multi-polarity is set to replace the uni-polarity of the past.

In the Middle East, this means that it cannot ensure that, for instance, the Gulf remains an American lake, as it has been ever since 1945 or at least since the British left in 1971, even if its engagement with Israel can continue unchecked. This has been a key part of American global strategy for the past sixty years because of concerns over the global oil market and threats to its operations or to the sanctity over the sea lanes that access it. Now other powers, led by China but with India not too far behind, challenge its hegemonic position there. Although the Chi-

nese challenge is not geopolitical in nature – yet – the implicit struggle for access to and eventually control of energy resources there will have geopolitical implications, as the tussle in the United Nations Security Council over policy towards Iran's nuclear ambitions has already shown. And Russia, too, is anxious to flex its muscles in what it still regards as its 'Near Abroad', strengthened as it has been by the reassertion of its Trans-Caucasus sphere-of-influence.

And the emergence of alternative hegemony necessarily dilutes the ability of the West to enforce its own agenda of engagement with regimes in the region, in the hope of defusing popular anger by improving governance and prosperity. Whatever the overt political ambitions of competitors to the West might be, they necessarily offer, in an eerie echo of the Cold War, alternative patrons for regional governments. Thus one part of Iranian truculence over its nuclear programme lies in the fact that it is an observer-member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, alongside Russia and China – China's 'Eastern NATO' as it has been called. Algeria, Libya and Qatar, too, are still mulling over Russian plans for a 'Gas OPEC', rather than integration with Europe as their major, indeed, sole energy partner. Western influence, in consequence, is far more attenuated than it was and it will be correspondingly more difficult to address the problems of trans-national violence that the 'War on Terror' was supposed to cure.

Yet, apart from these themes of Grand Strategy, as Edward Luttwak has described them, there is a much more pervasive issue of Western

credibility within the sphere of public opinion that will be crucial to any attempt to counter trans-national threat, whether through the 'War on Terror' or some subsequent strategy, whatever it may be. We have carelessly squandered our moral capital in the Middle East and North Africa since the end of the Cold War, with injudicious policies towards all the major crises in the region. We have forgotten that the Muslim world can also make moral judgements and that one of its crowning social principles, enshrined in Islamic doctrine, is social justice. Instead, from the sanctions regime against Iraq in the 1990s to acquiescence in Israel's rubbishing of the Oslo Accords, Western powers have fed Muslim perceptions of double standards in international affairs.

The reason why this is so serious is that it has created a moral and social environment in which, even if the violent excesses of movements such as al-Qa'ida are increasingly vilified as un- and anti-Islamic by local populations, its analysis of the situation, paradoxically, receives a sympathetic hearing. Hence the 60 per cent of Egyptians who take a positive view of al-Qa'ida; they do not admire its brutality but they recognise the accuracy of its message that the 'near enemy' – corrupt authoritarian regimes – can only exist because of the constant support and reinforcement it receives from the 'far enemy' – the West, particularly the United States⁶. Nor is the message particularly new; after all Ayatollah Khomeini considered the United States the 'Great Satan' and European states its 'Little Satan' accomplices. The difference today is that al-Qa'ida's view is reinforced by that sense of a Western betrayal of the

core principle of social justice too. And thus the demotic Middle East becomes Mao Test-Tung's sea in which guerrillas (or terrorists) can swim like fish.

Conversely, of course, such a social and political environment always made the task confronting those engaged in the 'War on Terror' virtually impossible, a situation that was compounded by the preference for military force over the use of intelligence and the civil power. Our new incumbent in the White House, therefore, faces a Herculean task in redirecting and reorienting America's policies within the Middle Eastern and North African region, in simple terms of policy design, let alone the challenge of competing hegemony and of the destructive consequences of the neo-conservative hegemonic discourse that pervades the media and public debate. A brief look at the details of what would be involved demonstrates just how massive a task it would be and will, no doubt, further feed my scepticism that either Senator McCain or Senator Obama would seriously attempt it.

There are three, perhaps four, long-standing crises in relations between the Middle East and North Africa and the West that have acted as festering sores for decades and that have undermined all of the systemic initiatives that have been undertaken – such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy, the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative or even the Middle East Peace Process – and that now feed trans-national violence. They are the Arab-Israeli dispute and the associated Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the aftermath of the situation in Iraq; the policies of

containment of Iran; and, perhaps, the impending failure in Afghanistan. Together they have generated such popular anger throughout the region that the widening circle of trans-national violence should not come as a surprise to Western policy-makers. Yet all of them, in theory, are easy to address if the will is there, for none of them present major political or moral dilemmas.

At the top of the list must come the conflicts involving Israel. They should have been resolved in the 1990s and would have been, had it not been for the intransigence of the Netanyahu government from 1996 onwards, coupled with the political weakness of Yasir Arafat. European powers played little part in bringing effective pressure to bear, not least because they deferred to American judgement and the United States, in the aftermath of the 1967 war, allowed ideological myth to replace balanced rational judgement so that successive American presidents have been increasingly incapable of altering the fundamental drift towards Israeli imperatives over the past forty years. Despite being the first administration to recognise that Palestinians were entitled to a state, the Bush administration did much less than its predecessors to try to encourage an equitable solution.

Indeed, it compounded the situation by its attitude towards the 2006 Palestinian elections, an attitude adopted to its shame by the European Union on the spurious grounds of counter-terrorism strategy, a position that was strengthened after Hamas's take-over of Gaza in June last year. In the same year, it supported Israel's unsuccessful war against Hizbullah in Lebanon and, more recently,

has contemplated supporting Israel in its threat to attack Iran over its nuclear programme – something it did do over the alleged Syrian nuclear site just over a year ago. Luckily, Mr Bush seems to have decided not to crown his presidency by initiating such an attack!

None of these acts could be seen as being supportive of a peace process and all of them have prejudiced the possibility of compromise being acceptable to the majority of Palestinians, whatever the weak leadership of Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank may promise. Any incoming administration will have to pressure Israel into stopping its settlement activities, accepting some compromise on Jerusalem and modifying its ban on refugee return if it really wishes to end the conflict. In view of the dominant discourse in Washington, it is virtually inconceivable that this can occur or could even be conceived as a project. But if it is not effectively addressed, it will continue to be a driver for trans-national violence from those informal actors in the region for whom no other mechanism exists to express their opposition. Indeed, they have now even made a virtue out of necessity in the arguments they deploy to justify their actions.

Next comes the vexed issue of Iran in which American irrationality towards the Islamic revolution over thirty years has rendered the negotiations led by the European Union in the 'three plus three' group over the nuclear issue far more complex. It is further compounded by the complex and largely unrecognised American relationship with Iran over Iraq, where Iranian acquiescence with American intentions is essential if

they are to be realised. Yet the United States continues – with some justification – to consider Iran its major challenge in the region, perceiving – with far less justification – a 'Shi'a arc of extremism' arching across the Middle East to Lebanon in an attempt to frustrate its objectives. The irony is that, despite the bellicose and often hostile rhetoric that emerges from Iran, many elements within the complex and opaque leadership in Teheran would happily embrace dialogue with the United States. It is something that Barak Obama has promised and that Iran-watchers such as Kenneth Pollak would encourage as a means of breaking the political logjam both within Iran and in terms of its external relationships.⁷ Although Sunni extremists reject Shi'ism, the political example of Iran remains a powerful symbol throughout the Middle East of successful resistance to American hegemony, as does its links with Syria, Hamas and Hizbullah.

The final issue that the next occupant of the White House will have to address, if he wishes to redress America's parlous situation in the Middle East and North Africa, is, of course, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases it will be a matter of tidying up situations that went badly wrong many years ago. In both cases, the departure of Western forces will draw much of the poison, although indirect support for both countries and now for Pakistan may have to continue for many years. In both cases it is a matter of recognising the errors of strategy and tactics that generated the violence, along with the highly questionable justifications originally adduced to legitimise pre-emptive intervention. In essence the United States needs to

return to the fundamental principles of the United Nations – something no American politician instinctively supports – and respect state sovereignty as a basic principle of international relations, despite the exceptional circumstances provided for in Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter and in the more recent doctrine of 'Responsibility to Protect'. That alone would do much to heal the damage caused during recent years.

It might help to recall that the original Afghani resistance to the Soviet invasion in 1979 arose from

'The United States needs to return to the fundamental principles of the United Nations'

conservative village elders and notables, alongside the religious radicals in Kabul, and that it was only prolonged resistance that generated a concept of resistance based on the politicised traditions of Islam revived as an ideology of violence. And that, in turn, led to the globalised vision of al-Qa'ida, now the preferred brand of the myriad of autonomous groups expressing their grievances against regional governments and their Western backers. Those particularised grievances had fed, too, on the longstanding resentments generated by the Arab-Israeli conflict and Western hostility towards Iraq after its defeat in Kuwait in 1990,

and Iran after its Islamic revolution. The problem is that now the Islamised ideology of violence has taken flight and exists independently of its causes – and that is the measure of the challenge that faces any administration which wishes to transform its relations with the Middle East and North Africa.

It seems to me highly unlikely that either of the two presidential candidates will want to engage with such a problem or will be able to appreciate the enormous gulf of distrust and dislike that has given content to Samuel Huntington's mischievous vision of political predestination. Instead, the 'War on Terror' will, in some modified and perhaps truncated form, continue to define Western relations with the Middle East and North Africa. I must, therefore, maintain my scepticism over its impending demise or of its replacement by policies designed to mend the damage it has caused. I fear that it will continue until it may be impossible to reverse, as American influence continues to diminish. Hopefully, this will not continue to the point described by George Kennan in his 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs* when he cited Thomas Mann:

Observing that human institutions often show the greatest outward brilliance at a moment when inner decay is in reality furthest advanced, he compared the Buddenbrook family in the days of its greatest glamour to one of those stars whose light shines most brightly on this world when in reality it has long ceased to exist.⁸

The problem is, however, that some such outcome is no longer beyond contemplation if current attitudes and policies are maintained.

Notes

- 1 'The Long Telegram': 861.00/2-2246 Telegram; The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary-of-State, Moscow February 22, 1946.
- 2 Rapoport D.C. (2004), 'The four waves of modern terrorism', Cronin A. and Ludes J. (2004) (eds), *Attacking terrorism: elements of a grand strategy*, Georgetown University Press (Washington DC)
- 3 Kaplan J. (2008), 'Terrorism's fifth wave: a theory, a conundrum and a dilemma,' *Perspectives on Terrorism II*, 2 (January 2008)
- 4 http://news_bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/7638566.stm
- 5 Woodham-Smith C. (1964), *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*. Signet (New York)
- 6 The terms are taken from Muhammad Faraj's *The absent obligation* – a reference to the role of *jihad* as the sixth pillar of Islam.
- 7 Kenneth Pollak, 'The future of Iran', lecture, September 26, 2008 at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia.
- 8 'X', 'The sources of Soviet conduct', *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947



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