

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Iran, Russia and the United States: The New Middle East

The civil war in Syria is entering a new phase, one fraught with significant implications for the Middle East, for Israel and for the United States. In the words of columnist Charles Krauthammer, “The great Muslim civil war, centered in Syria, is approaching its post-Islamic State phase. It’s the end of the beginning. The parties are maneuvering to shape what comes next.” ISIS is disappearing as an independent, organized state within the Middle East. Its threat as a terrorist organization remains viable, but the caliphate declared by Baghdadi is dead! The current fighting is about who inherits the sections of Syria and Iraq that ISIS controlled. What is now occurring within the Middle East is a Shiite-Sunni war for regional hegemony.

- “Iran (which is non-Arab) leads the Shiite side, attended by its Arab auxiliaries— Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shiite militias in Iraq and the highly penetrated government of Iraq, and Assad’s Alawite regime.” This is the now famous Shiite Crescent that stretches from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. As Iran consolidates control of this Crescent, it gives the Persians (aka Iranians) a Mediterranean access that it has not had in 2,300 years! The patronage and protection for this Shiite Crescent is Russia, which supplies the Crescent with cash, weapons and, since 2015, air cover from its new bases in Syria—a dream of Russian tsars Peter the Great and Catherine the Great now realized!!!
- On the other side of this Muslim civil war are the Sunnis led by Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan. The patron and (historic) protector of this alliance is the United States. President Obama had disengaged from playing an active role in this alliance, but under President Trump, the US has re-engaged.

What is the Shiite Crescent doing in the Middle East? As ISIS is losing its hold in Syria and Iraq, Iranian-controlled militias are taking control of critical roads and other strategic assets in western Iraq and eastern Syria with the goal of moving men and guns to proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon—a significant existential threat to Israel. In the battle for control of Iraq, Iran has won and the US has lost. As *New York Times* reporter, Tim Arango, demonstrates, “Iran never lost sight of its mission: to dominate its neighbor so thoroughly that Iraq could never again endanger it militarily and to use the country to effectively control a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean.” Krauthammer: The Iranian-Russian goal is “a unified Syria under Assad, the ever more pliant client of Iran and Russia; Hezbollah, tip of the Iranian spear, dominant in Lebanon; Iran, the regional arbiter; and Russia, with its Syrian bases, the outside hegemon.”

In light of this devastating development in the Middle East of this emerging Shiite Crescent, what should the policy of the US be? President Trump seems to have three rather vague aims when it comes to this volatile region: destroy ISIS, roll back Iran's growing power and reduce America's involvement in the Middle East. As *The Economist* correctly observes, "These are inconsistent, because sustained diplomatic and military engagement will be needed both to prevent a new ISIS rising from the ashes of the old and also to contain Iran, which is using its proxies and its own forces dotted around the region to extend its influence." John Bolton, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, makes a convincing argument that the US must articulate a rather clear objective of "pushing back these Iranian and Russian gains" which are articulated above. Why? [1] The Sunni governments of Saudi Arabia, for example, will never accept the hegemony of Iran in the Middle East. It has declared its willingness to challenge Iran, as it is now doing in Yemen, and as it has demonstrated in its sanctions against Qatar for its pro-Iranian demeanor. Saudi Arabia has also declared its willingness to pursue nuclear weapons in light of Iran's nuclear weapons program, which Obama's agreement did not end but only postponed. Chaos and disorder in the Middle East will result. [2] Russia's interference in this region critically threatens the interests of the US, Israel and other Sunni governments in the region. "Both Iran and the Assad regime remain terror-sponsoring states, only now they are committing their violence under Russia's protective umbrella. There is no reason for the US to pursue a strategy that enhances Russia's influence or that of its surrogates." This reality is of particular concern in light of President Trump's recent cut-off of all aid to America's proxies in the Syrian civil war. As one administration official argued, "Putin won in Syria." On a larger scale in both the Middle East and in Eastern Europe, columnist Michael Gerson argues, Russia "has employed a sophisticated mix of conventional operations and cyber-operations to annex territory and destabilize governments. It has systematically encouraged far-right, nationalist leaders and supported pro-Russian, anti-democratic parties across Europe. It is trying to delegitimize democratic processes on the theory that turbulence in the West is good for a rising East. This is a strategy that allows Russia to punch above its strategic weight, especially since Trump has chosen to abdicate the United States' natural role in opposition."

What does all of this mean? How can we sort through the complexities of the Middle East and beyond? Due to the loss of US influence in the Middle East under President Obama and due to the utter confusion and chaos of the Trump administration, the US is no longer feared; indeed, it is increasingly becoming irrelevant. This can be turned around if President Trump begins to end his administration's chaos and begins to articulate a coherent foreign policy. But it will take concerted, unified efforts for America to reassert its historic leadership in the Middle East. This new reality in the Middle East has caused me to think biblically about this region. The prophetic Scriptures in Daniel chapters 9 and 11-12 and in Revelation 12-14 speak of powers to the north and to the immediate east of Israel. ["Gog and Magog" may refer to these geographic areas as well.] A resurgent Russia under Putin and a resurgent Persia under Iran fit this description perfectly. Furthermore, as one studies prophetic Scripture, one struggles to find any reliable section that even remotely refers to the Western Hemisphere, specifically to North America. Is it possible that America's withdrawal from the world under Donald Trump could be the reason? The world order put together by the United States after World War II is

coming apart. Under Trump, the US is clearly withdrawing from the economic and political institutions of that order. Who is filling that vacuum created by US withdrawal? In the East it is clearly China. In the Middle East it is clearly Russia and Iran. We live in very dangerous times such that many are now beginning to speak of a “post-American world.” Since 1945, the US has been the arbiter of a “rules-based” world order. It has chosen to no longer fulfill that role. There is no greater illustration of that than in the Middle East.

See Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (22 June 2017); *The Economist* (8 July 2017), pp. 14, 41-42; John Bolton in the *Wall Street Journal* (29 June 2017); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* 920 June 2017); Tim Arango, “Iran Dominates in Iraq After US Opened Door,” *New York Times* (16 July 2017); Fareed Zakaria in the *Washington Post* (27 July 2017).