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READING HISTORY WRONG: the plight of European foreign policy in the Middle East

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Since the early 20th century, France and the United Kingdom (UK) and, after 1945, the United States (US), have been getting the Middle East wrong. In 2003, France's President Chirac and Germany's Chancellor Schröder refused to endorse what proved to be a catastrophic mistake: the US-led invasion of Iraq. Eight years later, President Sarkozy chose to abandon the wisdom of his predecessor and was a cheerleader for the toppling of the Libyan leader Gaddafi, which allowed Russia back into the Mediterranean area.

Western leaders' misreading of the Middle East has been compounded by the media, whose moral grandstanding has increasingly replaced serious reporting and debate.

Middle Eastern countries today are defending their interests aggressively and refusing to play by the rules set in Paris, London or Washington. A new nationalism stalks the region, making diplomacy more transactional.

as far as Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt in 1798, it is worth remembering that the term "Middle East" is a Eurocentric one coined by the Victorian-era Foreign Office to denote the region's relative proximity to Europe. It was adopted and popularised by the Americans during and after the Second World War. Michael Ancram went on to suggest that the West has "never done the Middle East very well", which was obvious in the wake of the American and British debacle in Iraq. The question remains today: how have Western and, more specifically, European leaders often got the region "so wrong, either in perception or in reality?" Not only did they get it wrong in 1915 but they "have been getting it wrong ever since". Michael Ancram believes the reasons included "contemptuous arrogance, hubris, ignorance, betrayal, greed, prejudice, misjudgement and a failure to learn from our mistakes". It is difficult to disagree with this harsh judgement.

In 1953, the British and Americans engineered the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddegh, the democratically elected prime minister of what was then known as Persia. They failed to anticipate the consequences of a decision that restored Shah Reza Pahlavi to power but subsequently led to a theocratic revolution in 1979. That left westerners facing a country whose leaders distrust them and, through their proxies, wield huge influence across the region. Europe has been reduced to being a mere spectator of a crisis which impacts it deeply. It is forced to defer to the United States, which cannot forgive the humiliation it suffered at the hands of Iran, where its diplomats were held captive for 444 days from November 1979. The only country to see its reputation enhanced was Algeria, which brokered a release of the hostages in January 1981.

A decade ago, one of the British Conservative Party's most distinguished minds, Michael Ancram, gave a talk entitled "How the West lost the Middle East".¹ Without going back

1. "How the West lost the Middle East" was a lecture given at Georgetown University on Tuesday October 1st, 2013, by the former shadow Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary of the UK Conservative Party, Michael Ancram.

The US “makes history” in 2003

Fast forward 20 years and one story encapsulates the wilful ignorance of history that continued to bedevil so much of Western policymaking from Afghanistan to Morocco. Before the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, chief of staff to the vice president, Dick Cheney, called in a respected American academic, an expert on Iraqi history, who told him that toppling Saddam Hussein and holding “democratic” elections would hugely increase Iran’s influence. “You understand history, we make it,” Libby answered. Two decades later, the results of making history are painfully evident.

Back in 2003, two senior European Union (EU) statesmen, the French president, Jacques Chirac, and the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, joined in 2004 by the newly elected Spanish prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, refused to endorse what

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proved to be a catastrophic mistake: the US-led invasion of Iraq. Despite the resignation of the British foreign secretary, Robin Cook, the UK had been reduced to what Howard Mackinder, one of the founding fathers of geopolitics, had after the First World War correctly diagnosed as Britain’s future role: its use by the US as “a moated aerodrome” across the Atlantic.

Eight short years after the invasion of Iraq, the then French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, chose to abandon the wisdom of his predecessor. For reasons which remain unclear, he was a cheerleader for the US president, Barack Obama, and the British prime minister, David Cameron, toppling Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Obama quickly came to regret his decision which helped reopen the doors of the Middle East to Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, who rebuilt Russia’s former position in the region on the back of Western miscalculations.

After the murder of the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in 1995 and the 9/11 attacks, the EU did little to stop the US and Israel’s attempt to airbrush the Palestinian people out of the story, notably by means of the Abraham Accords in which Sudan, Bahrain, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

recognised Israel without asking anything in return for the Palestinians. That geostrategic mistake came with a price. Irrespective of the opinion one might have of the behaviour of the parties to the Middle East crisis, the EU has been sleepwalking into diplomatic irrelevance at a time when the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is on the cusp of major changes.

A new nationalism stalks the Middle East

Twenty years after the collapse of Iraq, the people living in the region have decided to become agents of their own history. Some had done so individually (Iran in 1953) but were quickly brought to heel. The rise of China and India, and successive US defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan have offered states as diverse as Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, not to mention Morocco and Algeria, the opportunity to engage in more transactional forms of diplomacy than previously. They have redefined themselves as nation states. Gone is the lure of pan-Arabism, Sunni and Shi’ite Islamism and Judaism. Peoples in the region have embraced strong national identities that have and will increasingly weather many external and internal challenges to their existence.

Turkey and Iran are more advanced in this process than Iraq. Saudi Arabia has moved from proud pan-Islamism to nationalism. The Gulf states all practise independent foreign policies and exert influence well beyond the boundaries of their region. Retired US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas Freeman, **argued in August 2023** that “the Middle East is once again West Asia”.

Fifty-eight years after the Suez Crisis, which was a major defeat for Britain and France, 44 years after the fall of the Shah of Iran, 23 years after the 9/11 attacks which estranged the region from the US, and 13 years after the Arab uprisings whose memory is fast fading, various forms of populism are on the rise across the MENA region, and as far afield as India. After 9/11, America and Europe imposed a narrative on the MENA which was defined as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism. This frame of reference held little appeal to the peoples who inhabit the region. Worse still, it appears to be irrelevant.

Irrespective of the lenses one uses to read this vast land mass which sits at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, it remains central to world security. States there are increasingly non-aligned between East and West, as

Algeria has always been. Iran has been pushed closer to Russia and China by decades of US ostracism. Turkey plays an increasingly important role. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is here to stay, launched by a country which works hard to have good relations with all states in the region and last year brought two bitter enemies, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to the negotiating table. Clientelistic relations with the US are a thing of the past, which is not to say that the US and Europe have no influence on the course of events. Russia has become a de facto member of OPEC and the US failure to respond to various moves by Iran against Gulf Arab interests and freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz have convinced the Arabian Peninsula countries that they cannot entirely rely on the US umbrella. Diplomacy has become more transactional and, as a result, European interests are more difficult to define, let alone defend.

Israel for its part has moved from a place where Zionists sought Jewish independence in a mythical homeland to a hard-line nationalist state which believes it can airbrush millions of Palestinians out of history. After the Oslo Accords faltered in the mid-1990s, the EU failed to step in and devote more political capital to trying to find a modus vivendi between the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. Israel's military power might be uncontested but the security collapse it suffered on October 7th, 2023, has failed to convince its leaders that the country will not find lasting protection in the rubble of Gaza. Israel's future looks more uncertain than its military might suggest. As the role of states in the region increases, the willingness of external powers, including Israel and the EU, to offend them, will decline. Israel may have good relations with China, India and Russia but the US is deeply unhappy with Israel's outreach to China. Israel depends on US support, as it has for decades. It has no alternative friend to lean on. Saudi Arabia is prepared to normalise ties with Israel, but at a price which the latter is not prepared to pay, for the time being. The Palestinians may have lost, but Israel has not won.

Europe plays a weak hand

As these newly invigorated nation states practise realpolitik, major European states have talked themselves out of the script. The United States' much vaunted unipolar moment was short-lived. Europe never enjoyed such a luxury, though it might have

dreamt of it. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Europe's foreign policy comprised two distinct, and dissimilar, parts (Munckler, 2007). It had to keep up a two-way relationship with the more powerful United States, taking care not to simply provide resources for its operations while stepping in to deal with the consequences, without having any say in fundamental political-military decisions. And it had to resist political marginalisation but was unsuccessful in doing so. In the wake of the Balkans wars, the European states failed to understand how unstable their periphery was, from the border with Russia, through Turkey and the Middle East and across North Africa. Europeans focused on their constitutional-political order, on their cultural identity and noted a tendency of economic equilibrium between themselves and the United States.

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and southern flanks. Neither its military doctrine nor the state of its armed forces have prepared it for the challenge it faces in Ukraine and the Middle East. That is hardly surprising since military matters are the responsibility of individual states. Views on what to do and the means allocated to the armed forces differ from country to country.

The EU's difficulties are magnified by the US policy of seizing Russia, Iran and Venezuela's dollar and gold reserves. These seizures and other sanctions against these countries make a mockery of the fiduciary responsibilities of Western banks. It compounds a tendency towards "de-dollarisation", which carries huge consequences for Western economic and financial influence in the future. Is the EU sure that sanctions harm Russia more than they harm itself? Europe feels the economic pain of the twin crisis it is facing more than America does. The energy bill for its industry is much higher than it is in the United States. How, in such challenging circumstances, does one redefine, retool a European foreign policy worthy of the name?

The Gaza war has not just dealt a blow to the efforts of European governments to rally the rest of the world behind Ukraine and its war of self-defense against Russia, but it also places a question mark over the credibility of Europe's soft power – in the Arab world, it may already have suffered irreversible damage. The longer the fighting goes on, the more Europe is exposed to its consequences.

The trap of “unavoidable” to “deliberate” war

The broad conclusion that can be drawn from the above remarks is that the UK and France failed to appreciate the consequences that the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1922) and the abolition of the Caliphate (1924) would have across the Muslim lands. Seventy years later both countries and the US failed to understand how dire the

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collapse of the Soviet empire would be. The explosion in demand for oil after the First World War explains why the MENA region, including the Maghreb, became of direct concern to the UK and France. The story has two parts, in which the United States was in the driving seat from the early 1950s. These countries had the chance to become true friends to the Arab nation and a real force for progress throughout the region. They squandered that opportunity from the start and are now paying the price. As the West's influence on the region has begun to wane that of Turkey, the successor to the Ottoman Empire, has begun to rise. The wheel has turned full circle.

Oil and then natural gas have been the engines of Western progress, commodities which the Middle East and North Africa have in abundance. Algeria's independence was delayed because of the discovery of oil there by the French in the 1950s. Oil explains why the UK and the US toppled Mosaddegh and why all leading Western nations armed Saddam Hussein against Ayatollah Khomeini in a war where chemical weapons were used by the Iraqis without noticeable adverse comment from the West – which was hardly surprising since Germany and France had provided those weapons to the Iraqi leader. This is but the most egregious example of our hypocrisy when Europe promotes “human rights”.

“There is something deep within the Western psyche that mistrusts Islam and the Islamic nations” (Michael Ancram). Western scholars understand the strains within Islam; our politicians do not. Our politicians and much of our media seem unable to distinguish between Islam and Islamism and national Islamism. They patronisingly

referred to the revolts of 2011 as an Arab spring, but the Arabs saw it as an awakening to how they had been taken for granted and exploited over generations in the West's own interests. When Israel framed the Gaza war in the same terms as George W. Bush after 9/11, it fell into a similar trap. Jean Pierre Filiu (2024a) called Israel's reaction to the Hamas attack of October 7th, 2023, “**Israel's Iraqi moment**”. He observed a shift from “unavoidable to deliberate war” in the US invasion of Iraq and the Israeli bombing of Gaza. The strategic question we should be asking ourselves is whether bombing ideas into oblivion stands any chance of success. The US has developed a new minor military art form in which tactical victories produce strategic defeats.

Europeans are fond of patronising Americans over their alleged ignorance of history but Sarkozy and Cameron behaved in Libya in 2011 as if history had started the day they were elected – a mistake Sarkozy's predecessor had avoided. In the early 2000s, one of the UK's foremost security experts on Soviet Russia at the Ministry of Defence warned that Russia would not relinquish its imperial ambitions.² In putting together a coalition between former KGB officers and the Russian mafia, Vladimir Putin posed a particular threat. British political leaders paid no heed to the warning. As President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel denied Turkey its wish to join the EU, did they ever ask themselves whether the heartland of a once mighty empire would not one day object to European and American Middle East adventures? There are many “Scooter” Libby look-alikes in the European capitals.

Simple explanations such as ‘oil’ and ‘religion’ fail to explain **the complexity that has developed since 2011**, resulting from the interaction of domestic and external actors, usually the US, Russia, the UK, and France. Most conflicts up to the Arab uprisings of 2011, with the exception of Lebanon, involved two foreign interveners. From then onwards, rising Middle East powers such as Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran joined in the fray, trying to thwart each other. Nine different countries have deployed armed forces in Libya at one point since 2011, as Christopher Phillips explains in ‘Battleground’ (2024). As many as 30,000 people from 70 different countries were fighting for non-state actors in Syria. Turkey intervened forcefully in Libya to thwart the Moscow-backed warlord Khalifa Haftar because it had been frustrated in its attempt to change the regime in Syria by Russia. Any new balance of power is going to take years, if not decades, to build.

2. According to a private conversation the author had with one of Britain's most senior security analysts (London, December 2004).

The behaviour of the media

Europe and the United States' misreading of the Middle East has been compounded by the behaviour of the media. Fake news is not a recent Russian invention. Who recalls the Zinoviev letter, concocted in 1924 by the *Daily Mail* to try and smear Labour Party leaders? Who recalls the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, when the US Department of Defense deliberately skewed intelligence to create the impression that one of its destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese forces? This allowed President Lyndon Johnson to engage more US troops in the Vietnam War.

A few years later, Noam Chomsky pondered the proposition that "media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988, in [Jegham, 2024](#)). Reporting on the current crisis in Gaza suggests that much of the Western media has failed on two counts. The first is the failure to contextualise events in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Without context, Palestinians come across as single aggressors who abruptly choose to attack Israel. Second, Palestinians are often painted as generic Arabs who could and should seek refuge among other Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan. Such depictions deny the Palestinians their existence as a people. The situation is not helped by the killing of more journalists in the Israel-Hamas conflict since October 7th, 2023, than in any other, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), an NGO founded in 1992. International journalists are denied access to Gaza by Israel, to whom 2,800 of them have flocked in six months, and Egypt, whose leaders have not lost love for free reporting or Hamas.

[Robert Misik \(2024\)](#) points to what is perhaps the truly Orwellian dimension of the current reporting in Gaza, which has "less to do with real Palestinians and real Israelis than who and what one wants to be – how one wants to see the world and oneself in it. One poses as a heroic fighter against antisemitism, or against racism and colonialism while the external appurtenances of reality become at most the set for this show of the self, as props in a play – to whose script reality must be made to conform". Among the journalists who escape being props are those who write in the independent Israeli daily *Haaretz* and the Palestinians who report from Gaza. Both are actors in a tragedy, not onlookers. Nor must we forget the excellent reporting one finds on social media, which cannot be reduced to simply insulting one's adversaries.

The moral grandstanding that characterises much reporting in Western news outlets – and not simply on Middle Eastern affairs – explains why many people have given up on mainstream media. [The great French](#)

[philosopher Raymond Aron \(1905-1983\)](#) wrote regularly in the daily *Le Figaro*. His lucid analysis of Israel is all the more remarkable for his being Jewish. Yet he would find no place in today's mainstream French newspapers, where he would be accused of antisemitism. People have grown weary of the poor quality of debates between people who are touted as "experts". Round-the-clock television is a hungry beast. Its race to the bottom creates a form of dominating narrative, a doxa that kills serious debate. There was greater freedom to debate in the West during the Cold War.

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