

Redefining the Middle East

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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It may be convenient to perceive the Middle East as a politically charged, fractious region, rife with conflicts and disputes, void of many prospects, save those leading to even further uncertainty and turmoil.

While history is indeed rich with instances that would effortlessly validate such a notion, only disinterested minds would fail to appreciate the immense role played by great European and now American powers in painting such a grim portrait of a region that once served as the cradle of great civilizations.

The seemingly innocent classification of the Middle East as this cohesive, yet inherently violent entity is consistent with utterly militaristic and chauvinistic views constructed by numerous Western scholars, diplomats and military men, whose attempt to reduce a vast, diverse and intricate region has been compelled primarily by their countries' imperialist drive and hunger for territorial and political control.

This imperialist view of the world is understandably simplistic. Appreciating the depth and beauty of a potentially exploitable region can lead to costly hesitation, a loss that empires by definition in need of growth and expansion cannot afford. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the historic Israeli view of Palestinians either the total denial of their existence altogether, or at best the recognition of a far more inferior breed of human was more or less shaped around the same theme applied in a variety of global historic contexts: Native Americans as 'uncivilized', Central American natives as 'heathens', Australian Aboriginals as 'wild dogs', and so forth. Perhaps Palestinians, Native Americans, Mayans and Aboriginals did not have a great deal in common, but their conquerors certainly did: infinite interest in the land and utter disinterest in its indigenous inhabitants.

But why is this notion more relevant today in the Middle East than ever before? Perhaps because some Western powers, led by the United States and Britain insist on ignoring valuable lessons provided by history, and refuse to accept that the world around them is changing, that classic imperialism has already demonstrated its remarkable failure and ineffectuality.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, they still speak of a looming victory in Iraq; they still hope for a submissive Palestinian populace who would be forced to surrender to Israel's dictates; of a sheepish Iran who would beg for mercy at the first threat of being 'referred to the Security Council'; of a gullible Arab populace eager to throw flowers at the feet of the conquerors, and so forth. Not only are such fantasies unlikely to actualise, but they are also utterly condescending and reek with racism.

In the American case, the over-simplification, thus the undermining of the complexities of

the Iraqis, the Iranians, etc, exhibits an appalling level of foolishness that continues to expose itself in the perpetual Iraq war and the subsequent conflict with Iran. The American public was simply fed the original lie that created false links between the terrorist attacks of September 11 with various countries across the Middle East; the Pentagon was entrusted in a perpetual military drive, as self-serving, detached and inexperienced neoconservative clusters were told to lead a mindless campaign that has already proven to be an unmatched historic liability.

As some neocons are now distancing themselves from the Iraq disaster and are lining up for teaching jobs at prestigious American universities —the latest being Douglas Feith —others are pushing unreservedly for yet another crusade in Iran, accusing the military of mishandling the Iraq venture and ignoring the real menace to the east. ‘Iran, not Iraq is the real danger’, tirelessly parrot pro-war pundits.

If it’s too much to expect American experts to appreciate the disastrous British experience in Iraq a century ago, is it too much to expect the US to draw its lessons from Iraq before igniting another costly conflict in Iran? Seemingly it is. In fact, according to some ‘leading experts’ in the very influential American Enterprise Institute —a neocon hub, rife with obsessed intellectuals and heaps of crazy ideas, the Iraq war has already been won. One of their leading figures, Danielle Pletka told me in an interview that many Iranians keep complaining to her, “it’s not fair that you liberated the Iraqis and not us.”

Pletka is credited by some for bringing dissident Iraqi figure Ahmad Chalabi into the spotlight after exaggerating his political clout. Chalabi fed the neocons with the lies they needed to make their drive for war possible. Yet when the war proved disastrous, all fingers pointed to Chalabi for ‘misleading’ the US government.

The US government may wish to carry on with its fantasies, and Blair’s new government may trod along as well. The fact of the matter is that the Middle East is eager to define itself according to its own terms and aspirations. It’s neither middle, nor an east, and is not destined to eternal violence and chaos. The imperialist West needs to appreciate the complexities of this region, its richness and its growing potential. It needs to abandon the old Israeli view that “Arabs only understand the language of violence.”

If the US government wishes to escape its miserable fate in that region, it must redefine its relationship with the Middle East: replacing militancy with diplomacy, coercion with dialogue, and racism with partnership. Either that or uncertainty and chaos will continue to define the region, and define those foolish enough to perceive the Middle East through trite clichés and meaningless slogans.

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