False promise : The United States and Regime Change in the Middle East

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Since the end of World War II, the United States has sought to oust governments in the Middle East on an average of around once per decade. It has done so in places as diverse as Iran, Afghanistan (twice), Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, to count only the instances where regime change—the removal of a country's leaders and transformation of its political system—was the goal of U.S. policy, and where an administration made sustained efforts to bring it about. The motives for U.S. interventions in all of these countries have been equally varied, including countering communism, competing with geopolitical rivals, preventing the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), combatting combating terrorism, saving civilian lives, and trying to promote democracy. And the methods by which the United States has pursued regime change have also been extraordinarily diverse: sponsoring a military coup, providing covert or overt military assistance to opposition groups, invading and occupying, invading and not occupying, providing air power airpower to opposition forces, and relying on diplomacy, rhetoric, and sanctions alone. What is common to all these efforts, however, is that they invariably failed to achieve their ultimate goals, produced a range of unintended—and often catastrophic—consequences, carried extraordinary financial and human costs, and in many cases left both the target country and the United States worse off than they were before.

As I argue in my forthcoming book *Losing the Long Game: the False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*, regime change often seems to work out in the short term—leading to premature declarations of victory by its proponents—but then ends up failing badly as costs mount, unintended consequences arise, and instability spreads in the wake of the apparent initial success. In fact, the long-term results of regime change in the region are so consistently disappointing—regardless of the reasons why it was tried or the manner in which plans were executed—that it is surprising so many policymakers and analysts keep coming back to it as a viable policy option, hoping that somehow it will work out better next time. The track record also shows that the reason for the recurring failure is not just a matter of poor implementation or lack of sustained follow-up—the most common excuses of regime change proponents. Instead, it shows that there are inherently high costs, unexpected consequences, and insurmountable obstacles that make it exceedingly difficult for the United States to replace objectionable Middle Eastern regimes and leaders without creating new, different, and often bigger problems.

With few exceptions, the history of U.S. regime change efforts in the region reveals remarkably familiar patterns. Once U.S. policy makers decide to remove a given regime, they overstate the threat, underestimate the costs and risks, overpromise what they can accomplish, and prematurely claim success if and when the targeted regime falls. Invariably, however, stability quickly proves elusive, a security vacuum develops, insecure and suspicious neighbors interfere, allied contributions fall short, and long-standing ethnic, sectarian, geopolitical, and personal rivalries emerge that the United States is unable to control. As unexpected challenges emerge and costs mount, those who conceived of and oversold the policy blame the results on implementation, and an "if only" phase begins—"if only" we had sent more troops, or fewer troops, or different troops, or more money, or better diplomats, or "if only" we had followed up on any one of a number of other policy options that were not pursued. Over time, the American public sours on the results of the intervention and, tires of the costs of trying to make it a success, and the policy is shelved, usually after a new president enters office and blames the problem on the ill-conceived or poorly implemented strategy of his predecessor. This rejection of the policy then lasts until the next time leaders consider trying it again—sometimes in the very same country where it failed the first time.

Not every case of Middle East regime change conforms exactly to this pattern, of course. In some cases, certain U.S. goals are met initially before problems emerge later; in others, some objectives are achieved while new, different, and unexpected problems are created; in many cases, the United States derives strategic benefits from its intervention while the citizens of the target countries pay the price; and in some cases the result is a disaster for almost all concerned. In other words, to paraphrase Tolstoy, every unsuccessful attempt at regime change is unsuccessful in its own way. But the patterns and outcomes are consistent enough— across a wide range of countries, circumstances, and administrations—that future U.S. leaders would be wise to take them into careful account before concluding, yet again, that U.S. efforts to oust existing regimes will prove worth the high costs and risks.

Debates about regime change in the Middle East have gone on for many decades, but they took on renewed significance in 2018 when President Donald Trump withdrew from 2015 Iran nuclear deal and pivoted to regime change. Trump insisted he only wanted to change Iranian behavior, but it was hard to avoid conclusion that regime change the actual policy. Trump alleged in 2017 that the nuclear deal came "just before what would have been the total collapse of the Iranian regime" and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spelled out demands for a new nuclear deal that almost seemed designed to be rejected. Lest anyone have any doubt, Pompeo in May 2019 admitted that the regime's behavior was unlikely to change but "what can change is the people can change the government." In Trump's more simplistic formulation, a fight with Iran would mean the "official end of Iran," and he warned "Never threaten the United States again!" As Trump's Iran policy unfolded—demonizing the Iranian regime, exaggerating intelligence about weapons of mass destruction and Iranian links to al-Qaeda, associating with unsavory opposition groups, and overselling the likely benefits of confrontation—it was hard to avoid having flashbacks to 2002 and the run-up to the Iraq War.

A U.S. policy of promoting regime change in Iran would certainly be in America's and world's interest if it led to a new government that treated its people better, abandoned its nuclear program, stopped supporting terrorism and meddling in its neighbors' affairs, and was ready to cooperate with the United States. Less clear is whether those goals could be achieved with economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, covert action, or military force; whether the results would be the intended ones if it somehow were accomplished; and what the costs and side effects—for Americans, Iranians, and the region—would be of trying and failing to do so.

Trying to think through those questions led me to think even more about the track record of previous U.S. regime change efforts, which turns out to be replete with cautionary tales of hubris, overreach, and magical thinking. A look back at previous efforts since World War II—ironically, the first one 1953 intervention in Iran that contributed to some of the very problems later generations of Americans would seek to solve with regime change again—shows no case of clear success, some catastrophic failures, and universally high costs and unintended consequences. In every case it has proven far more costly and difficult than expected, and in no case has it led to anything even close to stable democracy, despite the promises of some of its proponents. If past is prologue, any administration that pursues such an approach should do so with its eyes wide open, and the American public—and our allies—should be very skeptical about its claims and promises.

More broadly and on a more personal level, my interest in this issue arose from my own direct experience with regime change in the Middle East as a member of the Obama administration from 2009 to 2015. First as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs and then as the White House coordinator for the Middle East at the National Security Council, I was closely involved in efforts to try to stabilize two countries where the previous administration had ousted regimes—Iraq and Afghanistan—and also in Obama's own, ultimately unsuccessful efforts to promote political transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Obama's experience with Middle East regime change would prove to be another cautionary tale, full of painful lessons about the limits of America's ability to foster positive change in the region and about the risks of pursuing regime change without the will or means to bring it about.

All these cases were of course very different from one another: the United States did not use military force at all in Egypt, it led a NATO military intervention Libya, and it relied on proxies in Syria. But the results were similar: the failure to engineer a successful political transition to democracy—or even to more effective, tolerant, or cooperative autocracy for that matter—and a legacy of protracted violence, sectarianism, instability, and geopolitical competition.

It is important to admit, of course, that these were all hard cases in which status quo, prior to American intervention, was hardly appealing. In foreign policy, inaction has costs and consequences that must be weighed against costs of action, and the "road not taken" is also fraught with danger and risk. In most cases discussed in my book, I acknowledge that the costs of inaction would likely have included enduring repression, human rights abuses, violence against civilians, and continued risks of regional conflict or even terrorist attacks. But when the menu includes only bad options, such outcomes must be weighed against the results of a

choice to remove (violently) an existing regime and to accept all the costs of pursuing that goal and the unpredictable consequences that follow. And when the United States sacrifices thousands of American, allied, and local lives, spends billions or trillions, alienates partners, exhausts US military, violates international laws and norms, fans flames of nationalistic resentment, and undermines public support for international engagement, even a "wash"—exchanging one set of problems for another—is simply not good enough. None of the Middle Eastern regimes the United States has removed deserved any sympathy, but even so, considering every attempted U.S.-led regime change operation in the Middle East since 1953, there are no examples of clear success, several catastrophic failures, and a track record in which costs have always been higher, benefits fewer, and the results more unpredictable than policymakers and proponents had promised.

Do these lessons of the past mean that regime change—in the Middle East or anywhere else—is never warranted and can never succeed? Should the United States and its allies, based on this depressing track record, resolve never to adopt regime change as policy? It is impossible to rule out that there could be cases where the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation or use, mass terrorism, genocide, or a direct attack on the United States would be such that the benefits of removing the threatening regime would exceed the costs of doing so. But if history is any guide, such cases will be rare to nonexistent, and even where they may exist, they demand far more caution, humility, and honesty about the likely costs and consequences than has been the case. Even in a case as seemingly compelling as Afghanistan in the 1980s, if Americans could have been told in advance what would follow the overthrow of the Soviet-backed government—a protracted civil war that killed a million civilians, the birth of the global jihadist movement, half a decade of dystopian Taliban rule, mass terrorist attacks on the United States, and the need for another regime change operation in Afghanistan that would cost more than two thousand over 2,000 American lives and expenditures of more than $50 billion a year for nearly two decades—it is far from clear they would have supported it in the first place. In Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, the case for intervening to get rid of a regime also initially seemed compelling, until the costs and results became known.

The usual response to this argument is that policy makers should have just followed up more effectively, but it is hard to argue, however, that regime change in the Middle East is a good conceptual idea but that the Eisenhower, Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, Obama, and Trump administrations happened to get implementation wrong—in every case over a nearly seventy year seventy-year period, sometimes by doing too much and sometimes by doing too little—but and that the next president who tries it will get it right. The iron rule of regime change in the Middle East seems to be that its costs will be higher than expected, unintended consequences will emerge, and results will leave much to be desired.

Some proponents of regime change argue that as difficult as it is, sometimes there is simply no alternative. And it's true, as I acknowledged throughout my book, that there were never good alternatives to regime change. But it's also true that even in these hard cases there were usually better options than intervening to oust and replace—by whatever method—the regime. In virtually every case, more modest aims and measures—from efforts to assist civilian

populations, deterrence of external aggression, targeted sanctions, diplomatic pressure, humanitarian relief, or in some cases even doing nothing—would have worked out better for both the United States and the local populations than what often turned out to be hugely ambitious, expensive, unsuccessful, and counterproductive regime change operations. The Hippocratic Oath to "do no harm" is not always an option in international diplomacy, where sometimes security threats or humanitarian crises require action that inevitably does harm. But as any physician would acknowledge, turning to aggressive, invasive treatment under the wrong circumstances can be worse than containing and managing problems, however real.

In most cases, in fact, the best alternative to regime change looks a lot like the containment strategy that won the Cold War—accepting that some problems must be managed rather than solved, while using diplomacy, engagement, defense, development, alliances, assistance, and the force of our own example to buy time and promote peaceful, long-term change. When the costs and results of regime change are considered, what George Kennan almost 75 years ago called "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment," turns out to be a better approach, even when facing dangerous, adversarial, and repressive regimes.

The regime change temptation will never go away. So long as there are states that threaten U.S. interests and mistreat their people—in other words, for the foreseeable future—U.S. leaders and pundits will periodically be pulled toward the idea that we can use our unparalleled military, diplomatic, and economic power to get rid of bad regimes and replace them with better ones. The bias of American political culture is to believe every problem has a solution, and the bias of the U.S. government is to act forcefully to try to solve those problems, no matter how difficult they might appear. The long, diverse, and tragic history of regime change in the Middle East, however, suggests that such temptations—like most other quick fixes that come along in life and politics—should be resisted. The next time U.S. leaders propose intervening in the Middle East to change a hostile regime, it can safely be assumed that such an enterprise will be more costly, less successful, and more replete with unintended consequences than proponents of such action realize or admit. So far at least, it has never been the other way around.