
December 1, 2006**OP-ED COLUMNIST**

The Energy Wall

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The problem of Iraq looks like such a mess that it's hard to figure out not only where we are but what to do next — if we decide to just leave. Whenever I find myself trying to think through a big problem in the Middle East like this, I start small and refer back to the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It can tell you a lot.

I believe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to the big “clash of civilizations” now under way between the Muslim world and the West what the Spanish Civil War was to World War II. It's Off Broadway to Broadway.

The Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939, was the theater where Great European powers tested out many weapons and tactics that were later deployed on a larger scale in World War II. Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the small theater where many weapons and tactics get tested out first and then go global. So if you study the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Off Broadway, you can learn a lot about how the larger war now playing out on Broadway, in Iraq and Afghanistan, might proceed.

For instance, airplane hijacking was perfected in the Israeli-Palestinian context, as a weapon of terrorism, and then was globalized. Suicide bombing was perfected there, and then was globalized. The Oslo peace process, which David Makovsky, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, calls an “attempt by Israel to empower a Palestinian partner with whom to negotiate,” was first tried there and then, in a different way, moved to the big stage with the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. These were a U.S. effort to create Arab and Afghan partners to push a progressive, democratic agenda in the Muslim world.

Unfortunately, Oslo failed Off Broadway, and now Iraq and even Afghanistan seem to be failing on Broadway. So what do we do next? Again, start by looking at what happened in the Israeli-Palestinian theater.

Israel decided to just build a wall.

As a result of the Palestinian intifada of 2000-2004. Israel concluded that partnership at that time was impossible with the Palestinians, whose leaders were too divided and dysfunctional to prevent suicide bombing. So Israel erected a wall, unilaterally pulled out of Gaza and basically said to the Palestinians, “We’ll continue to engage you, but only from a position of strength, only after we’re insulated from the daily threat of suicide bombings or the burden of occupying Gaza.”

What would be the equivalent for the West and the Muslim world? Also build a wall? Some people want to do that by vetoing Turkey’s entry into the European Union, which would be a huge, huge mistake. But how do we insulate ourselves from the madness of the Middle East — if Iraq and Afghanistan can’t be made to work — without giving up on reform there, which is still badly needed?

Build a virtual wall. End our oil addiction.

We need to end our dependence on this part of the world for energy, because it is debilitating for us and for them. It is terrible for us, because addicts never tell the truth to their pushers. We are the oil addicts and they are the oil pushers. The only way we can be brutally honest with them is if we undertake the necessary conservation measures, investments in renewable fuels and a gasoline tax hike that could make us energy independent.

I do not want my girls to live a world where the difference between a good day and bad day is whether Moktada al-Sadr lets Iraq’s prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, meet with the U.S. president or whether certain Arab regimes alter what their textbooks say about non-Muslims. I wish them all well, but I don’t want them impacting my life and I don’t want to be roiling theirs, and the only reason we are so intertwined now is O-I-L.

Not only would ending our oil addiction protect us from the worst in the Arab-Muslim world, it would help us support the best. These regimes will never reform as long as they enjoy windfall oil profits, which allow them to maintain closed societies with archaic education systems and protected industries that can’t compete globally. The small Persian Gulf state of Bahrain just held its second free election, in which women could vote and run. Bahrain is also the first Arab gulf state to start running out of oil. No accident.

Everyone asks what is our “Plan B” for Iraq. Answer: It’s get out as soon as we can, with the least damage possible, just as Israel got out of Gaza. And then build a wall — not a physical wall, but a wall of energy independence that will enable us to continue to engage honestly with the most progressive Arabs and Muslims on a reform agenda, but without being hostage to the most malevolent.

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