NEW YORK – It is time for the United States and other powers to let the Middle East govern itself in line with national sovereignty and the United Nations Charter. As the US contemplates yet another round of military action in Iraq and intervention in Syria, it should recognize two basic truths.

First, US interventions, which have cost the country trillions of dollars and thousands of lives over the past decade, have consistently destabilized the Middle East, while causing massive suffering in the affected countries. Second, the region’s governments – in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and elsewhere – have both the incentive and the means to reach mutual accommodations. What is stopping them is the belief that the US or some other outside power (such as Russia) will deliver a decisive victory on their behalf.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, the great powers of the day, Britain and France, carved out successor states in order to ensure their control over the Middle East’s oil, geopolitics, and transit routes to Asia. Their cynicism – reflected, for example, in the Sykes-Picot Agreement – established a lasting pattern of
destructive outside meddling. With America’s subsequent emergence as a global power, it treated the Middle East in the same way, relentlessly installing, toppling, bribing, or manipulating the region’s governments, all the while mouthing democratic rhetoric.

For example, less than two years after Iran’s democratically elected parliament and prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, the US and Britain used their secret services to topple Mossadegh and install the incompetent, violent, and authoritarian Shah Reza Pahlavi. Not surprisingly, the Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979 brought a wave of virulent anti-Americanism in its wake. Rather than seeking rapprochement, however, the US supported Saddam Hussein during Iraq’s eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s.

Iraq fared no better with the British and Americans. Britain ruthlessly created a subservient Iraqi state after WWI, backing Sunni elites to control the majority Shia population. After oil was discovered in the 1920s, Britain assumed control over the new oil fields, using military force as needed.

The US supported the 1968 coup that brought the Ba’ath Party – and Saddam – to power. With Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, however, the US turned on him, and has been entwined in Iraq’s politics ever since, including two wars, sanction regimes, the toppling of Saddam in 2003, and repeated attempts, as recently as this month, to install a government that it considered acceptable.

The result has been an unmitigated catastrophe: the destruction of Iraq as a functioning society in an ongoing civil war, fueled by outside powers, that has caused economic ruin and collapsing living standards. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died in the violence since 1990.

Syria endured decades of French dominance after WWI, and then alternatingly hot and cold relations with the US and Europe since the 1960s. During the past decade, the US and its allies have tried to weaken, and then, starting in 2011, to topple President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, mainly in a proxy war to undermine Iranian influence in Syria. The results have been devastating for the Syrian people. Assad
remains in power, but more than 190,000 Syrians are dead and millions have been
displaced as a result of an insurrection supported by the US and its allies (with Assad
backed by Russia and Iran). Some US officials are now reportedly considering an
alliance with Assad to fight the militant Islamic State, whose rise was enabled by the
US-backed insurrection.

After decades of cynical and often secret interventions by the US, Britain, France,
Russia, and other outside powers, the region’s political institutions are based largely
on corruption, sectarian politics, and brute force. Yet whenever a new Middle East
crisis erupts, the latest being triggered by the Islamic State’s recent gains, the US
intervenes again, perhaps to change a government (as it has just orchestrated in Iraq)
or to launch a new bombing assault. Backroom dealings and violence continue to rule
the day.

Pundits claim that Arabs cannot manage democracy. In fact, the US and its allies
simply don’t like the results of Arab democracy, which all too often produces
governments that are nationalist, anti-Israel, Islamist, and dangerous to America’s oil
interests. When the ballots go in that direction, the US simply ignores the election
results (as it did, for example, in 2006, when Hamas won a large majority of the
popular vote in Gaza).

The US cannot stop the spiral of violence in the Middle East. The damage in Libya,
Gaza, Syria, and Iraq demands that a political solution be found within the region, not
imposed from the outside. The UN Security Council should provide an international
framework in which the major powers pull back, lift crippling economic sanctions,
and abide by political agreements reached by the region's own governments and
factions.

Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other neighbors know one
another well enough – thanks to 2,000-plus years of trade and war – to sort out the
pieces themselves, without interference from the US, Russia, and the former colonial
powers of Europe. The countries of the Middle East have a common interest in
starving hyper-violent groups like the Islamic State of arms, money, and media
attention. They also share an interest in keeping oil flowing to world markets – and in
capturing the bulk of the revenues.

I am not claiming that all will be well if the US and other powers pull back. There is enough hatred, corruption, and arms in the region to keep it in crisis for years to come. And nobody should expect stable democracies any time soon.

But lasting solutions will not be found as long as the US and other foreign powers continue to meddle in the region. One hundred years after the start of WWI, colonial practices must finally come to an end. The Middle East needs the opportunity to govern itself, protected and supported by the UN Charter, not by any individual great power.

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