

International Affairs Forum Interview

October 13th 2005

By Dimitri Neos

IA-Forum talks with **Dr. Leon Hadar**, Research Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute and the author of "Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East" (Palgrave Macmillan), about Middle East policy past, present, and future.. (October 13, 2005)



International Affairs Forum: In your book, Sandstorm, you discuss the effect of the Cold War on U.S. Middle East Policy. Would you elaborate?

Dr. Leon Hadar: Since the end of World War II, with the weakening of the major European countries (France, Britain, etc) involved in the Middle East, the United States emerged as the major Western power there. In the context of containing the power of the Soviet Union via a bipolar system, the United States led the Western Alliance in the Middle East which, for most of the 20th century, has been a major arena for global competition. The U.S assumed this responsibility in the Middle East based on three components:

- **Geo-strategic:** The containment of the Soviet threat in the region. The region, because of its instability and because there were no clear alliances as there were in Europe during the Cold War, became a major arena for competition between the two blocs. The U.S. was interested in maintaining a military presence in the region and developing alliances for containment of the Soviet bloc.
- **Geo-economic:** The U.S. assumed responsibility for protecting access to important oil sources in the region. I'll stress that the US has never been dependent on Middle East oil. Most of the oil for the US has been – in the 20th and 21st century - from domestic production and North and South America (primarily Venezuela, Canada, Mexico). In fact, it has been Europe, Japan, and South Korea who have received most of the oil from the Middle East. Thus, American allies filled, and continue to fill, the role of 'free riders': countries who have enjoyed free access to oil in the region because they never had to go to war or build up major military forces to protect their interests in the region. The U.S. did it for them and it was willing to do it because of its responsibility to help the alliance during the Cold War.

- **Idealism:** Because of the Holocaust and other historical events, the U.S. felt a moral responsibility to help provide Israel with a certain level of security to prevent a major threat to its existence from the Arab world. This goes back to 1947/1948. Later on, this intertwined with Cold War considerations. At that time, some U.S. foreign policy experts actually considered support of Israel to be more in the U.S.'s interest than Israel's because they didn't want to create tension with the Arab world.

One of the major costs the U.S. had to pay in terms of maintaining a presence in the Middle East was juggling interests – on one hand the pro-American Arab interests and on the other, Israel. In their effort to achieve peace between the two sides, they had to create a condition that would not affect those interests.

When you talk about Middle East Cold War policies, I suggest that the 1973 War was probably the height of this paradigm because, at that time, America almost went to war with the Soviet Union with the threat of the oil embargo and a threat to the security of Israel. So the Middle East almost became part of a genetic makeup of American policymakers and policy analysts. Most of the policymakers, journalists, and those who managed and built policy were very influenced by that experience of 1973. It's not surprising that, since then, if something happens in the Middle East, there's the thought that the U.S. should do something to prevent it – from terrorist attacks to a major military conflict. It's been a major issue in U.S. foreign policy and interests from peace talks to engagements there.

IA-Forum: So you believe this Cold War based policy in the Middle East needs to be revisited and redefined.

Dr. Hadar: Yes. Since the Cold War ended in 1991, there has been a major need to reassess this Middle East Paradigm. First of all, the Soviet Union has disappeared, so the notion that the U.S. had to maintain its power in the region at the same level from the Cold War doesn't make a lot of sense. With the Soviets gone, there is no power left of that magnitude that poses any threat.

Secondly, within the geo-economic context, Europe (and especially the European Union) grew to be a major economic power that could compete with the U.S. With that being the case, it doesn't make sense for the United States to continue to treat the Europeans in the Middle East as 'free riders'. We should accept the argument that it's the Europeans who are dependent on oil from the region. Why should they (Europeans) be provided with this 'free riding' or free protection while they are competing with the US for markets, political and strategic influence. At a minimum, it is in the US's interests to start shifting some responsibility

for security in the region to the Europeans. When people say: ‘why haven’t Europeans spent more money on defense and how can they afford to run those expensive welfare programs, long vacations, etc.’ – one reason for that is they don’t have any incentive to spend on developing their military power because the US is doing it – from the Cold War on.

If you are a Machiavellian – a smart German or Frenchman – you would say to yourself: ‘I’m dealing with economic problems from taxes to pension reform. At least in the short term, why should I get involved with the Middle East? Let the Americans deal with it. Why should we even try to challenge them; let them pay the cost and handle the problems. We should take care of our own problems and reform our system’. This is the Chinese attitude also: let the Americans get into this quagmire, let them pay the cost. Then when the war on terrorism ends, we will be the winners because the American empire will be so weak and spread out that we can start advancing our own interests.

The third component is that, when the Cold War ended, in many respects, Arab countries (including the PLO) that were linked to the Soviet Union weakened and Israel emerged as the most powerful military in the region with the possible exception of Turkey. The main problem that Israel has been facing is not a military threat from Arabs but its continuing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This has threatened its existence as a Jewish state and probably as a viable state.



So all this is why I call for reevaluation of the Middle East Paradigm.

IA-Forum: You argue that there are distinct differences in this paradigm between the current Bush administration and that of George H. W. Bush and the Clinton administration.

Dr. Hadar: Yes, but they are very similar in that they all want to maintain this hegemony in the Middle East. George Bush, Sr. and Clinton wanted to do it, and could do it, at least for awhile through the look of a ‘pax Americana’ or empire lite, as I call it. This included containing Iraq and Iran through off-shore balancing and taking steps to facilitate peace between the Palestinians and Israelis. Since the second intifada and 9/11 though, it became apparent that you can’t have free ‘pax america’ or ‘empire lite’. Empire costs, you can’t have unlimited resources – as we are finding out.

It's clear that the US is currently the most powerful military power in the world. Now what is the US going to do with that? I argue in my book that instead of trying to achieve a monopoly of power, the Bush administration should propose a model of oligopoly. Even sometimes a powerful company that has achieved a monopoly that decides it's better to walk with others and allow the less powerful companies to help design the markets between them instead of trying to achieve total monopoly. In the international relations arena, the Congress of Vienna system is an example. This was set up under the greatest military powers but who still decided that it would be more effective to work together with the other major powers of that era. Instead of trying to achieve total hegemony in the system.

IA-Forum: You call for 'constructive disengagement' from the Middle East. The neocon argument could be that if the US leaves the Middle East, there will be a power vacuum, specifically in Iraq, that will lead to promoting extremism and civil war.

Dr. Hadar: I actually don't call for the US to disengage from the Middle East, I use the term specifically – 'constructive disengagement'. In the real world, I don't think it's possible for the United States to leave the region. I'm saying that it's time for the United States to start shedding power and at least start shifting some responsibility to other players. Of course the current Bush administration will continue to get itself in this mess and won't be able to get out.

Before the second Gulf war, a fantasy of the neocons was that if only the US would go to the Middle East and fight the war and win, the next day the Europeans and everyone else would join and decide to send troops to the region. Obviously, it didn't happen because it was a foolish idea.

IA-Forum: How would you envision the effect of construction disengagement on democratization efforts in Iraq?

Dr. Hadar: If you get the Europeans involved, a strategy could be developed for establishing a democracy similar to the situation in Yugoslavia. This would be a Kosovo-like system in which you have a Sunni region, a Shiite region, Kurdish region, etc. Moreover, to stabilize Iraq, regional cooperation will be needed. To do that, means bringing Iran into the picture because of its influence with the Shiites.

IA-Forum: Any final thoughts?

Dr. Hadar: What I'm worried about is a situation similar to that of the British and French in 1956. They both tried to advance hegemonic position in the Middle East but because they were weaker economically and militarily, they had no choice but to move off from the region and the

US and the Soviets became the two major powers. So we're looking at one day in the future of a possible nightmare scenario of a weakening of the US dollar, rising oil prices, and perhaps the Chinese withdrawing assets from the United States. This would put the U.S. in a position with no choice but to leave the Middle East. This would be 'destructive disengagement' and I'm suggesting something that is not natural to do.

I think the US needs to work with the Europeans and Russians instead of trying to do what the current Bush administration is doing. It must focus on the two major challenges that will face in the coming years. The first is the continuing instability in the world that is mostly Muslim, ranging from Yugoslavia to China. The US alone will not be able to deal with this challenge. It has to work with European and the Russians. The second challenge is dealing with China.

When you talk about the Middle East and instability, the United States should shift more responsibilities and security to the Europeans. For the Europeans, the Middle East is what Latin America and Central America is for the United States – strategically, economically, and geographically. All those issues suggest that it's time for the Europeans to play a more important role.

Again, I'm not suggesting a vacuum be created through constructive disengagement. I'm suggesting a policy that will allow the United States to adopt a more cost effective policy that will advance US interests as well as bringing some stability to the region. This would, in that context, get other powers more involved. Going back to 1991, if you dig a hole and continue to dig, at some point the cost of getting out of the hole becomes very high.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Dr. Hadar.

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