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EUROPE SHOULD AVOID INTERVENING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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From Pax Romana to the universal Islamic Caliphate, from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana, it is a constant feature of great powers throughout history to believe that their greatness entitles them if not creates a duty to impose their ways and beliefs on others. None succeeded in imprinting their DNA upon those they had subjugated. This was and is the lesson of history but we still refuse to learn it.

The broader Middle East only became of direct concern to the West as the Ottoman Empire declined and the demand for oil exploded. The West grasped it, exploited it and blew it. The people of North Africa, the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan know from bitter experience that when they have trusted us we have too often betrayed that trust. Until the early 1950s, the broader Middle East was largely the preserve of the French and the British. Thereafter the US was in the driving seat.

There is something deep within the western psyche that mistrusts Islam and the Islamic nations. It is a perverse instinct based on the Medieval fear of Muslim dominance which spread halfway across Spain and the Balkans. Arguably the most signal failure of Western policy has been our reluctance to criticise Israel when that country's behaviour merited it, that is central to the local perception of Western foreign policy in the Middle East. The West loves to lecture the region on democracy, human rights and the rule of law only to discard such lofty principles when the shoe does not fit them. It has shown again and again utter contempt for the value of Muslim lives – selling chemical weapons to Iraq in the 80s and the use of drones, to quote but two examples.

Neither the interventions in the 21st century nor the history of earlier interventions beginning with Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798 are encouraging precedents. Most of them failed to achieve their defined objectives and any such objectives were overtaken by the laws of unintended consequences. Underlying the democratic imperialism ideal is the faulty premise that the peoples of the region are culturally homogeneous, that their middle classes are strong and politically assertive and that a social and institutional basis exists for political democracy. Notwithstanding their democratic aspirations, many in the region cannot agree on the essential contours of the nation, much less the basic structure of the state.

Twenty five years ago, the Operation Desert Storm successfully evicted Iraqi occupying forces from Kuwait. The US-led coalition was large, comprised many Arab countries and was mandated by the United Nations. It was legitimate but only effective in the short term. By allowing Saddam Hussein to turn his helicopter gunships on the Shia, but not the Kurds, it denied the Iraqi people the opportunity to overthrow the dictator.

Fifteen years ago the US-led operation in Afghanistan was legally legitimate but it has not been effective. The support the West gave to the Taliban in the 1980s and 90s has come back to haunt them. Today Afghanistan is a failed state.

In 2003 the US-British invasion of Iraq failed on all counts. That country's army, civil service and oil industry was destroyed to the greater profit of the likes of Haliburton and private Western security companies. Handing power to the repressed Shias turned out to be disastrous. The consequences have been fatal throughout the region, whatever residual respect the people of the broader Middle East might have had for the US and Britain has evaporated.

In 2011 the West "stayed until the job was done" in Libya without ever defining what the job was. Our intervention was legal but the authority of NATO, which backed it, was not and it was illegal to support regime change. The perception in the region is that Arab lives are not a major European concern.

In Bahrain and more recently in Yemen we are backing the Saudis against Shias. We seem blissfully unaware that Sunni Saudi Arabia is the spiritual if not the actual home of Wahabi extremism. The intensely sectarian civil war into which the region has descended will stretch far and wide and will be long lasting. The bitter stalemated Israeli-Palestine dispute has lost none of its power to inspire hatred but has been joined by other conflicts of equal or greater intensity. These include confrontations between Saudi Arabia and its allies, and Iran; between Iran and Israel, between Salafi Muslims, Copts, and other Christians, Shiites, Alawites, and Druze; between Sunni jihadists and Shiite apostles of both clerical rule and secularism; between generals and demagogues, between the street and security forces, between Arabs, Kurds, Persians, Turks and Berbers. This mayhem could spread into Pakistan and India. Western involvement will invite reaction from either or both sides of this civil war, reaction on the ground but also reactions within the Muslim communities in the various European countries.

For better or ill, the states of the region have seized control of their own destiny. Tolerance is almost everywhere in retreat. Passionate divisions favour extremism and the continuation of conflict. One of the first lessons that European leaders must learn is that you do not have to go to war to be a great leader. The recent agreement between the West and Iran offers a glimmer of hope. To those of us in Europe who might grieve the passing away of the frontiers resulting from the agreement between Mr Sykes and Mr Picot a century ago, it is worth recalling the Chinese classic, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* which opens with these words "Empires wax and wane; states cleave asunder and coalesce". The US and Europe are implicated in many of the current conflicts but in none of them do either play a decisive role. Europe which - more than the US, must be mindful of the unintended consequences of intervening in southern rim Mediterranean countries - and the Middle East, should avoid intervening in the Middle East.