Op-Ed: A new century for the Mideast

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The United States, the European Union and Western-led institutions such as the **World Bank** repeatedly ask why the Middle East cannot govern itself.

The question is asked honestly, but without much self-awareness. After all, the single most important impediment to good governance in the region has been its lack of self-governance: the region's political institutions have been crippled as a result of repeated US and European intervention dating back to World War I, and in some places even earlier.

One century is enough.

The year 2016 should mark the start of a new century of homegrown Middle Eastern politics focused urgently on the challenges of sustainable development.

The Middle East's fate during the last 100 years was cast in November 1914, when the Ottoman Empire chose the losing side in World War I.

The result was the empire's dismantling, with the victorious powers, Britain and France, grabbing hegemonic control over its remnants.

Britain, already in control of Egypt since 1882, took effective control of governments in today's Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, while France, already in control of much of North Africa, took control of Lebanon and Syria.

Formal League of Nations mandates and other instruments of hegemony were exercised to ensure British and French power over oil, ports, shipping lanes and local leaders' foreign policies.

In what would become Saudi Arabia, Britain backed the Wahhabi fundamentalism of Ibn Saud over the Arab nationalism of the Hashemite Hijaz.

After World War II, the US picked up the interventionist mantle, following a CIA-backed military coup in Syria in 1949 with another CIA operation to topple Iran's Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 (to keep the West in control of the country's oil).

The same behaviour has continued up to the present day: the overthrow of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, the toppling of Egypt's president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and the ongoing war against Syria's President Bashar Assad.

For almost seven decades, the US and its allies have repeatedly intervened (or supported internally led coups) to oust governments that were not sufficiently under their thumb.

The West also armed the entire region through hundreds of billions of dollars in weapons sales.

The US established military bases throughout the region, and repeated failed operations by the CIA have left massive supplies of armaments in the hands of violent foes of the US and Europe.

So, when Western leaders ask Arabs and others in the region why they cannot govern themselves, they should be prepared for the answer: "For a full century, your interventions have undermined democratic institutions [by rejecting the results of the ballot box in Algeria, Palestine, Egypt and elsewhere]; stoked repeated and now chronic wars; armed the most violent jihadists for your cynical bidding; and created a killing field that today stretches from Bamako to Kabul."

What, then, should be done to bring about a new Middle East?

I would propose five principles.

First, and most important, the US should end covert CIA operations aimed at toppling or destabilising governments anywhere in the world.

The CIA was created in 1947 with two mandates, one valid (intelligence gathering) and the other disastrous (covert operations to overthrow regimes deemed "hostile" to US interests).

The US president can and should, by executive order, terminate CIA covert operations — and thereby end the legacy of blowback and mayhem that they have sustained, most notably in the Middle East.

Second, the US should pursue its sometimes-valid foreign-policy objectives in the region through the United Nations Security Council.

The current approach of building US-led "coalitions of the willing" has not only failed; it has also meant that even valid US objectives such as stopping Daesh are blocked by geopolitical rivalries.

The US would gain much by putting its foreign-policy initiatives to the test of Security Council votes.

When the Security Council rejected war in Iraq in 2003, the US would have been wise to

abstain from invading.

When Russia, a veto-wielding permanent member of the council, opposed the US-backed overthrow of Syrian President Assad, the US would have been wise to abstain from covert operations to topple him.

And now, the entire Security Council would coalesce around a global (but not a US) plan to fight Daesh.

Third, the US and Europe should accept the reality that democracy in the Middle East will produce many Islamist victories at the ballot box.

Many of the elected Islamist regimes will fail, as many poorly performing governments do. They will be overturned at the next ballot, or in the streets, or even by local generals.

But the repeated efforts of Britain, France and the US to keep all Islamist governments out of power only block political maturation in the region, without actually succeeding or providing long-term benefits.

Fourth, homegrown leaders from the Sahel through North Africa and the Middle East to Central Asia should recognise that the most important challenge facing the Islamic world today is the quality of education.

The region lags far behind its middle-income counterparts in science, math, technology innovation, entrepreneurship, small business development and (therefore) job creation.

Without high-quality education, there is little prospect for economic prosperity and political stability anywhere.

Finally, the region should address its exceptional vulnerability to environmental degradation and its overdependence on hydrocarbons, especially in view of the global shift to low-carbon energy.

The Muslim-majority region from West Africa to Central Asia is the world's largest populous dry region, a 8,000-kilometre swathe of water stress, desertification, rising temperatures and food insecurity.

These are the true challenges facing the Middle East.

The Sunni-Shiite divide, Assad's political future, and doctrinal disputes are of decidedly lesser long-term importance to the region than the unmet need for quality education, job skills, advanced technologies and sustainable development.

The many brave and progressive thinkers in the Islamic world should help to awaken their societies to this reality, and people of goodwill around the world should help them do it through peaceful cooperation and the end of imperial-style wars and manipulation.

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