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Tide of war not receding; dangers will mount as U.S. exits prematurely
By Lawrence J. Haas

WASHINGTON – Surveying the Greater Middle East, where chaos reigns from Egypt to Syria and where chances of war among any number of players are rising, you can hardly blame the typical American for wanting to wish it away.

But the 43 percent of U.S. voters who think that America is “too involved” in the Middle East, according to a recent Rasmussen poll, or the 58 percent who think that we should “leave things alone” in the Islamic world have it backward.

“Let me underscore the importance of the United States continuing to lead in the Middle East, North Africa and around the world,” a departing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it aptly at recent congressional hearings. “When America is absent, especially from unstable environments, there are consequences. Extremism takes root, our interests suffer and our security at home is threatened.”

Indeed, the tumult across the Greater Middle East of late, which has emboldened America’s state and non-state adversaries and worried our allies, shows what happens when the United States reduces its voice and footprint.

We want to believe that, as President Obama likes to say “the tide of war is receding” but, beyond America’s shores, the world hasn’t received the memo. Quite the contrary, as the United States seeks a respite from the region’s messiness, our reduced role is a big reason why dangers are mounting.

In Syria, for instance, our reticence to work with our European and regional allies to establish a no-fly zone that would throttle Syria’s air force has left a predictable vacuum, with Syria’s neighbors predictably unable to mount a collective effort to more effectively pressure Bashar al-Assad or aid the rebels.

By enabling al-Assad to hang on, U.S. reticence has lengthened the bloodbath through which al-Assad has now slaughtered an estimated 60,000 of his own people while giving jihadists more time to enter the playing field and position themselves to shape a post-Assad Syria in ways that we’ll regret.

In Iran, the regime continues to make progress in its nuclear pursuit, with no signs that the economic and financial sanctions that are clearing impairing the nation’s economy are deterring its leaders.

Meanwhile, with America’s withdrawals from nearby Iraq and Afghanistan sending clear signals about our long-term commitment to the region, a dangerous Tehran seeks regional supremacy

while Saudi Arabia and our other allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council struggle for ways to counteract its expansionism.

In Egypt, the United States showers the Muslim Brotherhood-led government with economic and military aid, presumably to buttress regional stability by strengthening the regime and preventing a national collapse.

But, Washington sends a disturbing signal to secular reformers in the region by staying largely mute as Cairo violates civil liberties and threatens to build a religious autocracy to replace its secular predecessor.

At least twice before, the United States has seen the harmful consequences of its retreat on the world stage.

After Versailles, our isolationism of the 1920s and '30s nourished not only the global economic warfare that fueled the Great Depression but also the European and Asian militarism that produced World War II.

After Vietnam, an uncertain United States turned inward again, leaving the Soviet Union to stoke Third World revolution in Ethiopia, Angola, and Rhodesia before invading Afghanistan in late 1979. The Islamic Revolution toppled a staunch U.S. ally in Iran, students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and seized our personnel, and America assumed the embarrassing posture of a paper tiger.

What's true today has been true for decades. The world looks to America for leadership. The more dangerous is the region, the higher are the stakes when we decide whether to assume or avoid the role.

Today in the Greater Middle East, we need more U.S. engagement, not less.

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