Pivoting, Advancing or Retreating? Washington Tries to Cope with a Chaotic Middle East in a Changing Global Order

Lecture by Dr. Michael Hudson

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A Summary by Bayan Jaber

Washington is struggling to discover the right balance between realism and idealism, between interventionism and isolationism, and between military and diplomatic approaches in the face of a volatile regional situation in which it can be hard to distinguish friends from enemies. This struggle was the subject of discussion in a lecture given by Dr. Michael C. Hudson at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) on October 1, 2014 at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Dr. Hudson is a Saif Ghobash Professor of Arab Studies and International Relations, Emeritus, Georgetown University and Professor of Political Science, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore and an IFI Visiting Scholar.

Hudson’s talk evaluated Obama’s performance and explained foreign policy behavior. It also addressed institutional concerns and problems pertaining to framing, history and Middle East regional issues.

According to Hudson, President Barak Obama is burdened by chaos in the Middle East and a paralysis inside Washington. “Obama is trying to cope with a plethora of conflicts and despite people's hope that he would help them out of their financial crisis, all he seems to have done is install a flawed health program”, he said. He observed that Obama is struggling against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and despite U.S.'s increasing military role in the region, the tide has not turned. Hudson criticized the massive war effort on terror (as Obama's predecessor called it), referring to it as futile. The problem has actually increased and ISIS continues to attract more recruits.

Hudson observed that Obama was too passive in his involvement in the Middle East and his initiative to counter terrorism seems to be focused on a military approach. In his opinion, Obama’s strategic vision is still murky and public diplomacy approaches seem to be relegated to the side lines.

He noted that the U.S. has a history of intervening in the world so as to secure their homeland and promote their ideals. He also listed framing as a problem where certain ideals and stereotypes about the Middle East seem to be prominent. He observed that opinion
makers tend to get carried away with their views which may be inaccurate reflections of reality. He suggested improving the conduct of American policies by evaluating how the Middle East is framed in the minds of American decision-makers.

Hudson drew attention to the fact that despite being a decision-maker, Obama is influenced by powerful lobbies such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC is a powerful pro-Israel network that exerts financial and political influence over state offices and it is almost obligatory for all serious presidential candidates to make a presence at their meetings.

Furthermore, Hudson explained foreign policy behavior while looking at different approaches. One of the approaches is that of a political economy where states try to accumulate capital. Here, he shed light on the business interests of having the U.S. increase its arsenal and sell drones and weapons where it can, noting that U.S.'s policies and dense military presence in the Gulf could be traced to an economic gain.

He also noted a tendency to exaggerate, simplify or dichotomize matters relating to the Middle East. There is thus much work to be done by think-tanks. He said that one cannot hope for serious change in U.S.'s policy anytime soon. This is because there are no serious signs in the Washington political landscape of any willingness to exert pressure on Israel regarding the illegal settlements in Jerusalem.

Hudson concluded with a gloomy outlook for the future, expecting more instability and turmoil in the Middle East. Despite the expanding powers of China and his belief that America is a declining power, Hudson sees that the U.S. is still by far the most powerful military force, but noted that military force alone cannot achieve any victory as it needs to be accompanied by political action.