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Article 1.

Los Angeles Times

# Moving past stalemate in the Middle East

Maen Rashid Areikat

February 19, 2013 -- With the U.S. administration's foreign policy team shaping up and planned visits by President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry to the Middle East, there are renewed hopes for movement on the political process. While welcoming these developments, we believe the effectiveness of the U.S. role in the region hinges on a robust and sustained policy pushing toward the resolution of the conflict as opposed to just managing it.

Although the recent Israeli elections showed how passive and indifferent Israelis have become about resolving the conflict with the Palestinians, I believe many outside observers are misreading the situation. The Israeli public is sheltered, even blinded, from seeing the immense and imminent danger facing Israel if the two-state solution collapses. The relative calm along with economic prosperity are contributing to the false

impression that all is well, when the reality is quite different.

On the Israeli side, the unabated building of illegal settlements and other facts on the ground, such as the Israeli-constructed wall in the West Bank, are destroying prospects for two states and are pushing the two peoples, unwillingly, toward a one-state solution instead. Demographic projections indicate that Palestinians and non-Jews are going to become a majority soon in all areas under Israel's control. If this materializes, Israelis will be confronted with two options, neither of which is appealing to them: granting citizenship and equal rights to everyone under their control regardless of ethnicity (which would destroy the identity that Israel is seeking), or keeping the status quo and creating a racist and non-democratic state.

On the Palestinian side, hope is mixed with apprehension over the future. Despite the persistence of the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian leadership has affirmed a culture of nonviolence. This has been reflected in Palestinian political prisoners waging hunger strikes and villagers erecting tents to protest the confiscation of Palestinian land. Palestine's admission to the United Nations as a nonmember observer state falls within this context of peaceful, diplomatic and political struggle.

Of course, a major challenge for us is ending internal divisions, and we are working on it. The irony is, however, that the more the Palestinians tilt toward nonviolence and diplomacy, the more Israel responds with illegal settlements expansion, restrictions and violence against Palestinians.

The potential for an agreement is there; we just need to create the conditions for it to succeed. The two sides can capitalize on

progress made since the Taba talks of 2001. Everybody knows the parameters: a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with mutually agreed-upon land swaps similar in size and quality, a shared capital in Jerusalem, acceptable and legitimate security arrangements and an agreed-upon and just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem based on the 1948 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. The success of any political process depends on clear terms of reference, a clear time frame and a clear endgame.

Palestinians do not want a repeat of failed efforts. They need to see tangible results indicating that the occupation is being dismantled. Israel today has no incentive to end the conflict. The Israeli public needs to be reminded of the dire consequences to all the parties if the conflict is allowed to fester. The U.S. and its partners must play a leading role in keeping the parties focused on one outcome: two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security within internationally recognized borders.

High-level U.S. engagement now, at the beginning of this second term, sends a clear message of commitment. But, unless the U.S. is willing to hold all the parties equally accountable, the chances for progress are at best slim. Obama must invest significant time to make sure the efforts bear fruit. A hesitant, timid or biased approach would only re-create the conditions that got us stuck in the first place.

Interestingly, there are two Middle East films nominated this year for the Oscar in the documentary category. "Five Broken Cameras" represents the Palestinian perspective, and "The Gatekeepers" represents the Israeli perspective. Although each

film is different, they both come to the same conclusion: The Israeli occupation has lasted too long. Hollywood gets it; Washington should too.

*Maen Rashid Areikat is chief representative of the general delegation of the Palestine Liberation Organization to the United States.*

Article 2.

NYT

# Beltway Foreign Policy

Roger Cohen

February 18, 2013 -- "IT is not going too far to say that American foreign policy has become completely subservient to tactical domestic political considerations." This stern verdict comes from Vali Nasr, who spent two years working for the Obama administration before becoming dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. In a book called "The Dispensable Nation," to be published in April, Nasr delivers a devastating portrait of a first-term foreign policy that shunned the tough choices of real diplomacy, often descended into pettiness, and was controlled "by a small cabal of relatively

inexperienced White House advisers."

Nasr, one of the most respected American authorities on the Middle East, served as senior adviser to Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan until his death in December 2010. From that vantage point, and later as a close observer, Nasr was led to the reluctant conclusion that the principal aim of Obama's policies "is not to make strategic decisions but to satisfy public opinion." In this sense the first-term Obama foreign policy was successful: He was re-elected. Americans wanted extrication from the big wars and a smaller global footprint: Obama, with some back and forth, delivered. But the price was high and opportunities lost. "The Dispensable Nation" constitutes important reading as John Kerry moves into his new job as secretary of state. It nails the drift away from the art of diplomacy — with its painful give-and-take — toward a U.S. foreign policy driven by the Pentagon, intelligence agencies and short-term political calculus. It holds the president to account for his zigzags from Kabul to Jerusalem. It demonstrates the emasculation of the State Department: Vasr quotes Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, telling him of Hillary Clinton that, "It is incredible how little support she got from the White House. They want to control everything." And it paints a persuasive picture of an American decline driven not so much by the inevitable rise of other powers as by "inconsistency" that has "cast doubt on our leadership."

Nowhere was this inconsistency more evident than in Afghanistan. Obama doubled-down by committing tens of thousands more troops to show he was no wimp, only to set a date for a drawdown to show he was no warmonger. Marines

died; few cared. He appointed Holbrooke as his point man only to ensure that he "never received the authority to do diplomacy." Obama's message to President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan was: "Ignore my special representative." The White House campaign against Holbrooke was "a theater of the absurd," Nasr writes. "Holbrooke was not included in Obama's videoconferences with Karzai and was cut out of the presidential retinue when Obama went to Afghanistan." The White House seemed "more interested in bringing Holbrooke down than getting the policy right." The pettiness was striking: "The White House kept a dossier on Holbrooke's misdeeds and Clinton kept a folder on churlish attempts by the White House's AfPak office to undermine Holbrooke." Diplomacy died. Serious negotiation with the Taliban and involving Iran in talks on Afghanistan's future — bold steps that carried a domestic political price — were shunned. The use of trade as a bridge got scant attention. Nasr concludes on Afghanistan: "We are just washing our hands of it, hoping there will be a decent interval of calm — a reasonable distance between our departure and the catastrophe to follow." In Pakistan, too nuclear to ignore, the ultimate "frenemy," Nasr observed policy veering between frustrated confrontation and half-hearted attempts to change the relationship through engagement. "The crucial reality was that the Taliban helped Pakistan face down India in the contest over Afghanistan," Nasr writes. America was never able to change that equation. Aid poured in to secure those nukes and win hearts and minds: Drones drained away any gratitude. A proposed "strategic dialogue" went nowhere. "Pakistan is a failure of American policy, a failure of the sort that comes from the president handing foreign policy over to the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies." In Iran, Nasr demonstrates Obama's

deep ambivalence about any deal on the nuclear program. “Pressure,” he writes, “has become an end in itself.” The dual track of ever tougher sanctions combined with diplomatic outreach was “not even dual. It relied on one track, and that was pressure.” The reality was that, “Engagement was a cover for a coercive campaign of sabotage, economic pressure and cyberwarfare.” Opportunities to begin real step-by-step diplomacy involving Iran giving up its low-enriched uranium in exchange for progressive sanctions relief were lost. What was Tehran to think when “the sum total of three major rounds of diplomatic negotiation was that America would give some bits and bobs of old aircraft in exchange for Iran’s nuclear program”?

On Israel-Palestine, as with Iran, Obama began with some fresh ideas only to retreat. He tried to stop Israeli settlement expansion. Then he gave up when the domestic price looked too high. The result has been drift.

“The Dispensable Nation” is a brave book. Its core message is: Diplomacy is tough and carries a price, but the price is higher when it is abandoned.

Article 3.

The Globe and Mail

# Rapid nuclear proliferation simply doesn’t happen

Peter Jones

Feb. 18, 2013 -- Among the many reasons why Iran should not acquire nuclear weapons (a sentiment with which any reasonable person must agree), one hears the argument that it would initiate a cascade of proliferation across the Middle East. First Saudi Arabia, then Turkey, then Egypt, then God knows who would inevitably acquire nuclear weapons – and quickly. So goes the conventional wisdom expressed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Stephen Harper and any number of hawkish think-tank experts.

There is considerable historical evidence to suggest that this would not happen. If it did, it would take a long time. Talk of rapid proliferation across the region is simply not apt.

Since the dawn of the nuclear era, various leaders and analysts have predicted that nuclear proliferation would take place rapidly and inexorably. Those countries that could build the bomb would do so, and others would build it in response. It has been predicted that almost 50 countries would eventually join the nuclear club alongside the five nuclear-weapon states recognized under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

That prediction has proved wrong. Only four additional countries – India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – have acquired nuclear weapons. One country unambiguously tried and was stopped (Iraq, before it was foolish enough to invade Kuwait). In each case, the reasons why these countries decided to build nuclear weapons had to do with the specifics of their security situations rather than a reflex action. This record is hardly cause for celebration but also hardly the proliferation threat so often forecast.

Moreover, neighbours were threatened when these countries acquired nuclear weapons but decided not to build nuclear weapons in response. Japan and South Korea did not build them after China and then North Korea did, despite chilling rhetoric from the one-party states that easily matched anything Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said about Israel. No Arab country built them after Israel did. Yes, Pakistan followed India into the nuclear club, but no other country in the region has.

Rather than build their own bombs, most countries faced with neighbours acquiring nuclear weapons have sought alliances and protection from others – most often the United States.

Thus, contrary to popular wisdom, experience has been that most states do not build nuclear bombs, even when they have the opportunity and, seemingly, the motive to do so. If there is a norm of international conduct regarding nuclear weapons, it is a norm of non-proliferation. For every state that has developed nuclear weapons, there are dozens more, including Canada, that could have but did not. South Africa did but then gave them up. There are several, including Brazil, Argentina and Sweden, that went down the road toward nuclear weapons but stopped and went back. There are even a few – Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan – that inherited nuclear weapons when the Soviet Union collapsed but soon gave them up voluntarily.

And yet, in the Iranian case, we continue to be captivated by an argument that widespread regional proliferation is inevitable. Why? In part, it is because of what some scholars of proliferation call a "proliferation narrative" that has gripped the majority of analysts and practitioners of international affairs.

This narrative, which focuses on power as the key element of international affairs, holds that nuclear weapons are the ultimate expression of power; that states seek to maximize their power; and so states, all other things being equal, will want nuclear weapons. Moreover, states facing a nuclear-armed foe will almost certainly want their own bomb. Despite decades of evidence to the contrary, this narrative continues to hold sway in large parts of the academic and practitioner communities.

Another reason may be that pointing to an inevitable proliferation cascade is ample justification for those who wish to attack Iran to do so. It is a powerful narrative: "Yes, an attack on Iran may be dangerous, uncertain and could lead to a regional war, but far better to try to stop the Iranians from getting the bomb before X number of other [whisper when you say this] Muslim countries across the Middle East decide to build bombs as well."

But would they? And could they do it quickly? Despite some musings by some members of the Saudi Royal Family, it is debatable as to whether any other Middle East country would automatically decide to build a bomb if Iran ever did. Moreover, even if other states in the region did decide to build bombs, it would take decades for them to do so. Experience seems to show that most of them would eventually counter an Iranian bomb by moving even further into the security embrace of the United States – an outcome profoundly at odds with Iran's interests.

The idea of a rapid and inevitable proliferation cascade across the Middle East is simply not reasonable – but it works well as a scare tactic to justify a war with Iran that might otherwise be a hard sell to a war-weary American public.

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Article 4.

The Financial Times

# Disarmed Europe will face the world alone

Gideon Rachman

February 18, 2013 -- One day Europeans may find that the US military is not there to deal with threats lapping at their frontiers

In the 1970s, Mogens Glistrup, a prominent Danish politician, became famous for suggesting that his country replace its armed forces with a recorded message saying "we surrender" in Russian.

Glistrup is no longer with us but his approach to defence seems to be gaining ground. Europe's ability to use military force is dwindling fast, and with it the power of Europeans to defend their interests around the world. It is true that there are many troops from European countries deployed in Afghanistan, and the French are in Mali. But, behind the headlines, military

capacity is shrinking.

Since 2008, in response to the economic downturn, most big European countries have cut defence spending by 10-15 per cent. The longer-term trends are even more striking. Britain's Royal Air Force now has just a quarter of the number of combat aircraft it had in the 1970s. The Royal Navy has 19 destroyers and frigates, compared with 69 in 1977. The British army is scheduled to shrink to 82,000 soldiers, its smallest size since the Napoleonic wars. In 1990 Britain had 27 submarines (excluding those that carry ballistic missiles) and France had 17. The two countries now have seven and six respectively.

And yet Britain and France are commonly regarded as the only two European countries that still take defence seriously. The British point out that, even after the current round of cuts, the UK will have the fourth-largest military budget in the world. Britain is also, for the moment, one of only two European nations to meet the Nato target of devoting 2 per cent of gross domestic product to defence – the other is Greece.

The situation in most other European countries is worse – Spain devotes less than 1 per cent of GDP to military spending. And much European military spending goes on pensions or pay, not equipment. The Belgians distinguished themselves in the Libyan campaign of 2011. But about 75 per cent of Belgian military spending now goes on personnel – causing one critic to call the Belgian military "an unusually well-armed pension fund". None of this might matter much if the US was still willing to step in whenever the Europeans fell short. In fact, America is losing patience with Europe's inability to act on its own. The Obama administration was clearly reluctant to get involved in Libya.

And when the French found that they needed American help on air-to-air refuelling for the Mali operation, they were aghast to discover that the Americans initially wanted to charge them. In the end, the US agreed to provide its facilities for free. But the point was made. The US is fed up with a situation in which America alone now accounts for about three-quarters of Nato defence spending. One day, perhaps soon, the Europeans may wake up and find that the US military is simply not there to deal with whatever threat is lapping at the frontiers of Europe. For the fact is that America itself is preparing for a new age of military austerity. If automatic budget cuts kick in next month, the Pentagon could have to cut $1tn in defence spending over the course of the next decade. Even if the US avoids such drastic measures, the long-term trend is clearly down. The US is also determined to concentrate more of its military might in the Pacific. The US Navy currently devotes 50 per cent of resources to the Pacific and 50 per cent to Europe and the Middle East – but in future, Asia will get 60 per cent. For the Americans, this makes sense. While European defence spending has gone down by roughly 20 per cent over the past decade, Chinese defence spending has risen by almost 200 per cent. Last year, for the first time in centuries, Asian nations spent more on military force than European countries. If the US is going to devote more of a declining military budget towards Asia-Pacific, Uncle Sam's presence in Europe and the Middle East must clearly diminish. Perhaps it doesn't matter? The threat of a land invasion of continental Europe seems to have more or less disappeared with the Soviet Union. The menace that seems to worry Europeans most is the damage austerity could do to the continent's vaunted social model rather than any military threat. Politicians are responding to public demand by trying to protect health and

social budgets ahead of defence spending. Even new security threats such as terrorism are not obviously susceptible to conventional military power. A decade of bitter experience in Afghanistan has been an object lesson in the difficulty of using the military to tackle a "failed state".

So it is certainly possible that Europeans will get away with a modern version of the Glistrup strategy in which we disband our armed forces, order a takeaway and turn on the answering machine.

Yet you do not have to look very far beyond Europe's borders to see an array of potential threats massing over the next decade. The Middle East is in turmoil and thousands are dying in Syria, threatening the stability of the whole region. Iran's nuclear programme could well lead to confrontation and threaten European energy supplies. Russian military spending is rising. And growing tensions between China and its neighbours could one day menace the freedom of navigation on which European trade depends.

The risk is that Europeans may suddenly find that they need armed forces, after all – only to discover that they are not there any more.

Article 5.

Asharq Alawsat

# Syria: Is it Time for Military Intervention?

Amir Taheri

18 February 2013 -- Has the time come for military intervention in Syria? Despite efforts in many capitals to dodge the question, it is moving to the center of the debate over the Syrian tragedy. British Foreign Secretary William Hague says “no option” has been ruled out, code for readiness to consider military intervention. Senior American and French officials have expressed similar views, albeit with varying degrees of ambiguity.

In a sense, the question may well be redundant because military intervention is already taking place in a variety of ways. Russia and Iran continue to supply Bashar Al-Assad’s forces with arms and military advice, while elements of Lebanese Hezbollah may also be involved in fighting anti-Assad units. At the other end of the spectrum, Turkey and several Arab states have been helping rebel groups secure arms and funds since the start of the conflict. The presence of non-Syrian fighters on the side of the rebels may also be regarded as foreign military intervention, albeit an informal one.

However, the real debate is about the wisdom or folly of a ‘game-changing’ intervention. Such a course of action must have the magnitude to tip the balance in favor of the rebels and accelerate Assad’s downfall.

Those opposed to intervention represent a spectrum of opinions. Some are pacifists who oppose all wars. Others are political orphans of the Cold War who back Assad because they see him as part of a burgeoning anti-West bloc that includes Russia and Iran. The majority of those who oppose intervention, however, present a number of political and practical objections that must be considered on their merits.

The first objection is that there is no clear strategy for intervention. Do we want foreign armies to destroy Assad's war machine and march on Damascus? The answer must be no. The intervention needed would be aimed at two precise objectives. The first is to enforce the arms embargo already approved by over a hundred nations. This requires a naval blockade plus aerial and ground surveillance of possible smuggling routes through Iraq and Lebanon. The second objective would be to set up safe havens, and to protect them against Assad's air force and mechanized ground units. Three such safe havens already exist in embryonic form, just inside the borders from Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Last week, the United Nations managed to ferry aid to one of those for the first time, circumventing Assad's regime.

The second objection is that an embargo imposed by Western powers, especially through naval blockade, could attract stiff opposition from Russia and Iran, triggering the risk of a broader conflict. That is highly unlikely. Iran lacks the military muscle to make an impression in the Mediterranean, although it might attempt to persuade Lebanese Hezbollah to launch reprisal terrorist operations. Though an opportunist power, Russia pursues a pragmatic, realist foreign policy. Even when it was the Soviet Union, Russia knew how far to push a confrontation, as illustrated during the Cuban crisis of 1962. In any case, Russia lacks the naval power to challenge a blockade imposed by NATO in the Mediterranean. Russia will back Assad as long as the price it has to pay is not higher than any possible future rewards.

The third objection is that there is no legal basis for intervention because Russia's veto blocks the United Nations' Security Council. Lack of explicit UN approval, however, does not make an intervention illegal. In fact, since the end of the Second

World War, we have witnessed scores of wars that took place without a UN imprimatur. In fact, UN-approved wars were the exception, notably in Korea in 1951 and Iraq in 1991. Over decades, the duty to intervene—especially to stop or prevent genocide—has been woven into the international judicial culture. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime and stop genocide. A few months later, the Tanzanian army moved into Uganda to evict Idi Amin and stop the massacres he had started. In 1983, the United States, leading a coalition of Caribbean states, invaded Grenada to liberate hundreds of hostages and change the regime in place. In none of those cases was there UN authorization. The same principle was used to justify intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina and, later, Kosovo: to stop genocide. In both cases, the UN was paralyzed by the threat of a Russian veto.

Addressing the UN General Assembly in 1999, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan offered a reflection on the genocide in Rwanda: "If, in those dark days and hours leading up to the genocide, a coalition of states had been prepared to act in defense of the Tutsi population, but did not receive prompt Council authorization, should such a coalition have stood aside and allowed the horror to unfold?"

Annan insisted that the world cannot stand aside when gross and systematic violations of human rights are taking place, and challenged the international community to adopt the notion of humanitarian intervention as legitimate and universal principle.

The fourth objection is that Syria's geography makes intervention much more difficult than was the case in Libya. Actually, the opposite might be true. Libya is the world's seventeenth-largest country, while Syria is eighty-ninth. Blockading Libya would mean sealing off 1,770 kilometers of

coastline. The comparable number for Syria is 193 kilometers. Libya's land borders are almost twice as long as those of Syria, while four out of Syria's five neighbors have little or no reason to help Assad hang on to power.

The fifth objection is that, being costly, military intervention would be hard to sell to Western nations grappling with growing national debts and economic decline. It is true: war is expensive. However, allowing Syria to become an ungoverned land, and thus a haven for terror and crime on the Mediterranean, could prove far costlier in the long run. Worse still, the Syrian civil war could morph into the prelude for a larger regional war, as was the case in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. Western public opinion may not be favorable to military intervention at present; however, this is because the debate has not taken place and the public has not been informed of arguments for and against. A good debate could address that lacuna and mobilize public support for humanitarian intervention.

The sixth objection is that, unlike Libya, which was a homogenous society, Syria is a mosaic of religious communities and ethnic groups. Thus, military intervention would not necessarily produce a harmonious transition. The fact, however, is that Libya is also a diverse country. Ethnic Arabs, Berbers and black Africans constitute different communities brought together under Italian and British colonial rule and, later, the dictatorship imposed by Colonel Gaddafi. Eastern and western Libya have been separate and distinct regions since Roman times. Even when it comes to religion, Libya is home to scores of different brands of Sufism and versions of Islam mixed with tribal folk culture. To be sure, Syria offers a greater degree of diversity, although at least seventy percent of the population are Sunni Muslim Arabs. Diversity, however, does not disqualify a nation

from seeking freedom. The seventh objection is that we do not know what would happen once the despot is booted out. There are no democrats in Syria, and foreign intervention could produce either chaos or another dictatorship. While pessimism is prudent in most cases in Middle Eastern politics, it is wrong to let the massacre continue for fear that something worse may follow. There are no democrats in Syria because there has never been democracy there. It is the chicken-and-egg conundrum.
The eighth objection is that democracy could not be imposed by force. This is true. However, force could be used to remove impediments to democracy, as was the case in Germany and Japan in the 1940s. In any case, the urgent aim of intervention now is to stop the massacre of Syrian people, not to install democracy there. The first step is to put the people of Syria in charge of their own destiny. What they do with their sovereignty and what kind of political system they wish to build would then be their own affair. The ninth objection is that unlike Gaddafi, who had given up his weapons of mass destruction, Assad still has large quantities of chemical arms that he could use against the people of Syria or its neighbors as a 'Samson option.' The possibility of Assad using chemical weapons must not be taken lightly. After all, his fellow Ba'athist, Saddam Hussein, did use poison gas to kill thousands of Kurds in Halabcheh. However, one cannot allow Assad to blackmail his people and the entire humanity with his chemical arsenal. Concern about the possibility of a larger massacre does not justify indifference to the daily killings already taking place.
The tenth objection is that, faced with major military intervention by Western powers, Assad might well threaten Israel in conjunction with Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which is controlled by Iran. Such an eventuality is more

than remote. The Assad regime, father and son, has always used the Palestinian issue as a means of justifying its despotism while carefully avoiding a direct clash with Israel. In any case, one could not justify the current massacre of Syrian people as the price the world has to pay for Assad's promise not to threaten Israel. The Palestine issue has been the last refuge of many scoundrels for more than six decades: in his time, Saddam Hussein used it to justify his own murderous regime. The eleventh objection is that military intervention would dash all hopes of a political solution. So why not allow diplomacy to deploy its full arsenal of means and measures before we consider other options? This is good advice. War must always be the last resort. If the Gordian knot could be untied with fingers, why use the sword? However, diplomacy cannot become a fig leaf to hide inaction. Over the past two years, numerous diplomatic efforts have been made, including two missions led by Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, two diplomats of the highest standing. Thanks to inside knowledge, we can report that Brahimi has offered the fairest and the most realistic compromise formula. More recently, Moaz Al-Khatib, the nominal head of the Syrian opposition, has gone further by calling for direct negotiations with the regime, exposing himself to charges of treason. All of these attempts to implement a peaceful solution have hit the brick wall of Assad's refusal. Military intervention could be triggered at the end of a fixed period of reflection granted to Assad.

The twelfth objection is inspired by Machiavellian calculations of power politics. It runs like this: why not let Iran and Russia bear the burden of prolonging Assad's moribund regime for a while longer? Syria has already cost Iran over USD 10 billion, and that at a time that the Islamic Republic is facing economic

meltdown. For Tehran, Syria has become an expensive embarrassment. Allow things to continue a bit longer and Syria may well pull down Iran with it. As for Russia, why not let Vladimir Putin to consolidate his image in the minds of the Arabs as a guarantor of delinquent despots? I called this argument 'Machiavellian,' but 'diabolical' might be more apt. Should the people of Syria be sacrificed so that Iran could be brought to its knees and Russia shut out of the Arab world as an enemy?
While we ponder the question, in Syria, people die.

Article 6.

The New-Yorker

# Obama's Brain

Gary Marcus

February 18, 2013 -- According to an article on the front page of this morning's New York Times, the Obama Administration is planning to seek three billion dollars from Congress to map the human brain's activity. What will Obama's proposed investment in neuroscience look like? Few details have been announced.

As it happens, the European Union announced a similarly massive investment in neuroscience just a few weeks ago: a ten-year, one-and-a-half-billion-dollar initiative to build a complete simulation of the human brain. But, as I argued recently, that's

not a realistic goal, and the Obama Administration shouldn't try to do the same. Another, wiser option would be to marshal our forces on a different project: rather than trying prematurely to model the whole brain, the federal government should invest in understanding the fundamental question in neuroscience, which is how the brain connects to behavior.

At some level, the brain is a kind of computer. It takes in information, combines new information with previously acquired information, and performs actions based on the results of those computations.

Yet we know remarkably little about how the brain performs its computations and how those computations relate to behavior, especially in comparison to what we know about computers. Computers are, for all practical purposes, entirely understood. We know what they're made of, we know how electrons move inside of them, and we know how their basic logical functions (such as "and," "or," and "not") combine to form more complex operations, such as arithmetic and control (e.g., performing process X if a password is entered correctly and process Y if the password is entered incorrectly). In turn, programming languages relate machine language to more abstract sets of instructions that are more readily understood by human beings. An unbroken chain of inference connects the plans of the programmer to the actions of the electrons that ultimately implement them.

When it comes to the brain, we know comparatively little, in part because the brain is considerably less straightforward. By some counts (though the exact number remains elusive), there are hundreds of different kinds of neurons, each with different

physical properties and ways of interacting with other neurons. We don't, for example, even know whether the basic unit of computational currency in the brain is digital (e.g., a set of zeroes and ones, like in virtually all modern computers) or analog (like the continuously moving second hand in an old-fashioned clock, an approach that was commonly used in some pre-Second World War computers). Likewise, although we know something about which brain regions participate in the processing and storage of memories, we still don't understand how the brain encodes those memories. And we know very little about how the brain's basic units organize into larger-scale circuits, and how those circuits, often in physically disparate parts of the brain, work together to produce unified behavior.

Modern biology was launched in large part by three discoveries: Oswald Avery's discovery of DNA; Watson and Crick's deciphering of the physical structure of the DNA; and the discovery, by several researchers in the early nineteen sixties, of the code by which different triples of RNA nucleotides are turned into amino acids. All three of these discoveries were made possible in part by Mendel's experiments with peas, in which he identified what we now know as genes.

The brain will finally give up its secrets when we do something similar, by constructing an inventory of the brain's basic elements—the neural analogs to transistors, logic gates, and microprocessors—and relating those basic elements to broader-scale cognitive computations. To connect brain to behavior, we don't need to build a whole brain, as the E.U. aims to do; we need to understand how the brain's parts work together. And new techniques, like optogenetics (which allow experimenters to control brain activity—and hence an animal's behavior—by

exposing neurons to light) and fluorescent imaging (which makes it possible to monitor the responses of thousands of neurons simultaneously in awake, behaving animals), make addressing such questions potentially feasible for the first time.

Rather than putting a huge amount of money into a single project, as the Europeans have, and as the Obama Administration apparently intends, we should endow five separate projects, at a billion dollars each, addressing five of the most fundamental unsolved questions in neuroscience. One project, for example, should focus on deciphering the basic language of the brain. What is the basic element of neural computation? What is the basic scheme by which symbolic information (like sentences) are stored? A second should focus on understanding the rules governing how neurons organize into circuits; a third on neural plasticity and neural development, and understanding how the brain communicates information from one region to another, and determines which circuits to use in a given situation; a fourth on the relation between brain circuits, genes, and behavior; a fifth on developing new techniques for analyzing and observing brain function.

We absolutely can't afford not to invest big in neuroscience. If Obama's upcoming request is denied by Congress, many of the world's leading neuroscientists will be tempted to leave the U.S. for better funding in Europe (as one eminent neuroscientist did recently, after twenty years at Caltech); whether it meets its grand goal or not, the European project will certainly lead to a significant number of smaller scientific advances. If the U.S. doesn't follow suit, we will lose our lead in neuroscience, and will likely be left playing catch-up in some of the biggest game-changing industries on the horizon, like human-level artificial

intelligence and direct brain-computer interfaces (even though both fields originated in the United States).

But let's not just build a static map, either. What we need is not simply a wiring diagram of the brain (which we can leave to the Europeans) but an understanding of how brain circuits work, the language the brain uses to encode information, and an understanding of how that circuitry works together to govern human behavior.

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