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Drummond: End ignorance of Mideast geography

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Americans like their geography plain and simple. As Congress and the President work feverishly (if not in tandem) these days to extricate us from the mire that is Iraq, the suspicion grows that the missteps that got us there in the first place can be correlated with Americans' prevailing geographic ignorance.

Conditioned by sound bites, Americans have no time for nuance. If they had any image of the Middle East at all before 9/11, Americans could have come up with half-truths: The people of the Middle East are Arabs (except for the Jews). All Arabs are Muslim.

The Middle East is flat, hot and dry. Middle Eastern countries are rich with oil; their rulers are profligate, or dictatorial, or both; their economies are moribund. Democracy, American-style, could cure Middle Eastern ills. In some mysterious way we got our alphabet from the Middle East, and our Monotheism. But that was ancient history, without connection to the present.

Few Americans had any idea that the Middle East is a region of geographic complexity: of flat desert, yes, but also of high rugged barrier ranges where insurgents can hide, and of lush river valleys with ancient cities and villages of mud that can trap an army trained for Cold War conflict. They had no idea that not all of the Middle East is oil-rich, and that the majority of its people, underemployed and angry, struggle daily to put food in their mouth or keep a roof over their head.

They had no idea that in the Middle East the majority of peoples (i.e. Turks and Fars) speak languages other than Arabic; that there are nations in the Middle East (i.e. the Kurds and the Baluchis) that want to be countries, and countries (i.e. Iraq and Iran) full of dissident nationalities; that Islam in the Middle East is rife with religious fervor but split into conflicting Sunni and Shi'a identities, and variations within these.

They had some vague and erroneous idea that "this region has been at war for thousands of years and would always be at war." But they were unable to trace clear ties to the past, to understand the roots of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, or to account for Arab, Turkish, or Iranian bitterness towards the West.

Our policy makers over several presidencies have displayed an amazing lack of "ground truth." With a Cold War fixation, they overthrew a popularly elected prime minister in Iran in the 50s, armed a western-oriented Shah in the 60s, reaped the results in the late 70s, left Lebanon to its own weak devices in the 80s after


Hezbollah blew up a Marine Corp barracks, armed mujahedin tribesmen in Afghanistan and Saddamist thugs in the 80s. They placed American troops on Arabian soil in the 90s, failed to respond to early Al Qaeda provocation in the late 90s, bombed Afghanistan after 9/11 then failed to secure it or to root out Bin Laden, went with shock and awe but cloudy provocation into Iraq in 2003 without viable follow-up planning, and throughout supported Israel as it inserted Jewish settlements into the Arab West Bank.

Now the administration that brought us Iraq is far wiser in geography and realpolitik than it was nearly five years ago. We now have no doubt about the significance of Shi'a/Sunni difference, of Shi'a numerical superiority in Iraq, or the historical depth of Iraqi Shi'a links with Iran. Aware of Turkey's sensitivities, we refuse to listen to those who would split Iraq into three sovereign parts. We respect the depth of tribal loyalties in Iraq and are now working within, not against, these loyalties. We are bringing Israelis and Palestinians to the peace-table, as a counter balance to the threat of Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas links. Clearly, we are trying to extricate ourselves from the mire of our past mis-steps. One wonders how many of these mis-steps were the result of an American education system that has sidelined geography for half a century.

Drummond is a member of the Writers Circle of the American Geographical Society, a longtime fellow of the society, and a former member of its research staff. She is retired from teaching geography at Indiana State University and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. She is the author of 'Holy Land, Whose Land? Modern Dilemma, Ancient Roots.' She can be reached at dd2@indstate.edu.

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