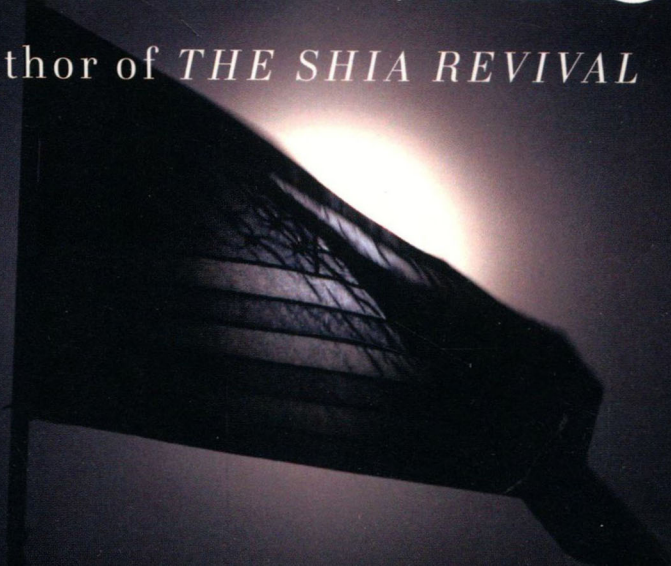


THE
DISPENSABLE
NATION

AMERICAN
FOREIGN POLICY
IN RETREAT

VALI NASR

Author of *THE SHIA REVIVAL*



VALI NASR

THE DISPENSABLE
NATION



American Foreign Policy in Retreat

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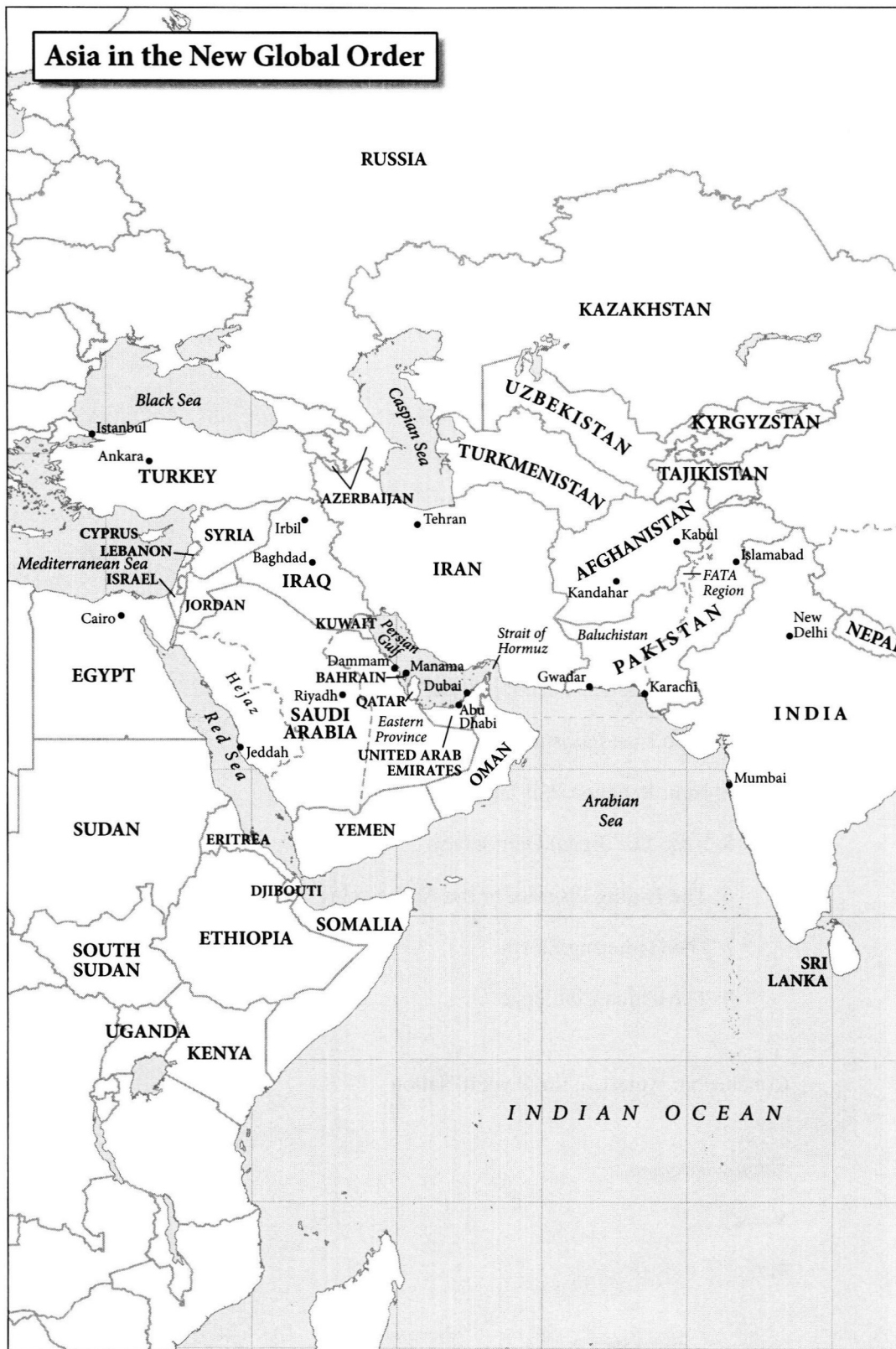
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There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

—William Shakespeare,
Julius Caesar

Asia in the New Global Order





THE DISPENSABLE NATION

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INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of my two years working in the Obama administration on the problems of the greater Middle East. I thought long and hard about writing it—I didn't want it used as a political bludgeon. My goal instead is to shed light on the making of American foreign policy during the Obama years and explain what its consequences will be for the greater Middle East and for us.

The book tells three stories simultaneously.

The first is the story of an administration that made it extremely difficult for its own foreign policy experts to be heard. This book will describe how both Hillary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke, two incredibly dedicated and talented people, had to fight to have their voices count on major foreign policy initiatives. Holbrooke never succeeded; Hillary Clinton did—but it was often a battle, and usually happened only when it finally became clear, to a White House that had jealously guarded all foreign policy making and then relied heavily on the military and intelligence agencies to guide its decisions, that these agencies' solutions were not, and could never be, a substitute for the type of patient, long-range, credible diplomacy that garners the respect of our allies and their support when we need it. In other words, when things seemed to be falling apart, the administration finally turned to Hillary because they knew she was the only person who could save the situation, and she did that time and again.

One could argue that in most administrations, there is an inevitable imbalance between the military intelligence complex, with its offerings of swift and dynamic, as well as media-attracting, action, and the foreign

policy establishment, with its slow and seemingly plodding deliberative style. But this administration advertised itself as something different. On the campaign trail, candidate Obama repeatedly stressed that he wanted to get things right in the Middle East, reversing the damage that had been done by the previous administration's reliance on faulty intelligence and its willingness to apply military solutions to problems it barely understood.

Candidate Obama said he would engage the Muslim world, not just threaten to attack it. He would work to change the standing of the United States in the region. He would show leadership by listening, not just by talking. While the American Right was belittling the benefits of his community-organizing background, I thought to myself that the Middle East could use a little community organizing. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I felt that American leadership in building and nurturing economic and political ties, rooted in regional and international institutions that would bring stability in a chaotic place, was just what was missing in the region. It is why I joined the administration.

The imbalance in influence between the military and the foreign policy establishment was cause enough for concern, but the president's habit of funneling major foreign policy decisions through a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisers whose turf was strictly politics was truly disturbing. The primary concern of these advisers was how any action in Afghanistan or the Middle East would play on the nightly news, or which talking point it would give the Republicans in the relentless war they were waging against the president. That the Obama administration has been praised during the 2012 election season for its successful handling of foreign policy has, I believe, less to do with its accomplishments in Afghanistan or the Middle East than with how American actions in that region of the world were reshaped to accommodate partisan political concerns in a way unimaginable a few decades ago.

By September 2012, when violent anti-American protests swept across the Muslim world, claiming the lives of four American diplomats and dozens of demonstrators, two things were clear: first, that we had got the Middle East badly wrong and the administration's policies had been off the mark. And second, that retreating from the region given the

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direction it is moving in would be disastrous. This book will explain all this.

The second story this book will tell is what happened when those of us in the foreign policy establishment were told to go out and sell often stunningly obtuse proposals to our allies in the region. Many Americans hold a picture in their head of Middle East leaders as militaristic thugs, corrupt political operators, narrow-minded connivers, or American stooges. And there are no doubt people who fit those descriptions in positions of power there—and elsewhere. But over the years, especially the past eleven years, the leaders of the Middle East have developed exquisitely fine-tuned ears to the potential consequences of U.S. actions for their own nations. They greatly fear our military power because they feel we use it recklessly, and they know they have few defenses against it. And they are no longer willing to sit back and nod in agreement when we propose plans that require their cooperation, plans they know won't work and put their nations at risk, plans they have good reason to believe we will abandon when push comes to shove, and sometimes even before that, leaving them to deal with the mess we have made.

I will describe in detail what it was like to sit through these kinds of negotiations, first with Richard Holbrooke at the head of our side of the table, and later with Hillary Clinton. I will also relate what world leaders and foreign policy professionals I have known for years have seen and heard in these settings. For many Americans this will be an eye-opening view of how their country presents itself in world councils. It will give voice to those who call the shots in the Middle East and ask whether their responses to our plans are worth hearing and perhaps heeding. For the American public has to understand that when your grand plans for a region persuade no one but yourself—not your friends, not your “freemies,” not your collaborators, and certainly not your enemies—it's time to start asking some hard questions back home.

But perhaps the most important story this book tells is this one: the story of the price the United States will pay for its failure to understand that the coming geopolitical competition with China will not be played out in the Pacific theater alone. Important parts of that competition will be played out in the Middle East, and we had better be prepared for the jousting and its global consequences.

The American people are tired of war, rightly so, and welcome talk of leaving the region—not just packing up the soldiers but closing up shop altogether. Indeed, the president has marketed our exit from the Middle East as a foreign policy coup, one that will not only unburden us from the weight of the region's problems but also give us the freedom we need to pursue other, more pressing, initiatives to address significant national security concerns.

Ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the broader ill-defined “war on terror,” is, I agree, a very good idea, provided it is done properly without damage to our interests or the region's stability. But we should not kid ourselves that the rhetoric of departure is anything more than rhetoric; we are bringing home our troops and winding down diplomatic and economic engagement, but leaving behind our drones and Special Forces. We should not expect that the region will look more kindly on drone attacks and secret raids than they did on broader U.S. military operations. But the more important point is that none of the issues that brought us to the Middle East in the first place have been resolved—not those that existed at the end of World War II, when Britain handed over to us the role of the great power in the region, not those that have kept us there for over sixty years, and certainly not those that attracted our attention after 9/11. If anything, the region is less stable and more vulnerable to crisis than ever before. And its importance to commerce and global order has not diminished.

Here is what America's leaders and the American public cannot afford to miss. The near- and even long-term prospects for the Middle East are not difficult to predict. Either some outside power will have to step in and impose order on the region or it will collapse into chaos and instability, becoming the stage upon which untold numbers of nonstate actors, each with a different script, will attempt to wreak havoc upon us. China would love to play the role of great power in the region, and, one might argue, is preparing to do exactly that. Just as we pivot east, China is pivoting farther west. And it is doing so through its close and growing economic and diplomatic relationships with the Arab world, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. Indeed, while we scratched our heads about how to turn Pakistan our way during my tenure in the Obama administration, Chinese leaders were serenading Pakistan with reassurances that

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Sino-Pakistani relations are “higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, stronger than steel, and sweeter than honey.”¹

Will we be comfortable having China pull the Middle East into its sphere of influence? Letting China manage al-Qaeda or Iran’s nuclear ambition? Or try to resolve Arab-Israeli conflicts? Of course not. The Middle East will once again become the region where a great rivalry is played out, with China now playing the role of the Soviet Union.

These past four years presented us with an unrecognized opportunity to build regional economic, political, and military institutions to help the region resolve its many crises and allow it to manage on its own without constant new infusions of American lives and dollars. We could have simultaneously reduced the threat of al-Qaeda and strengthened the push for democracy, and figured out a way to draw Iran into the fold and minimize China’s influence in the region, not to mention saving the lives and money spent on yet another surge whose ultimate benefits remain questionable. But there is no equivalent to NATO or ASEAN in the Middle East—no organization anchored in an economic and security alliance with the United States. Nor does the Obama administration, despite its own claim to engaging the region and building comity and community, show any indication of understanding the need for such institution building. This, of course, would be even truer of a Republican administration. And so instead, after China further strengthens its position in the Middle East, we will find ourselves on the back foot, having to play catch-up with money we don’t have or will have to borrow from China.

But it is not too late. It is still possible to look ahead and deal with the problems in the region before they become another major crisis. This is why I have written this book.

—Vali Nasr, November 1, 2012

