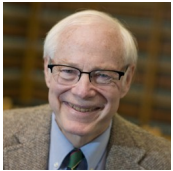


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In 2006, U.S. Representative Jim Leach of Iowa introduced a resolution urging President George W. Bush to appoint a “Special Envoy for Middle East Peace.” The resolution said, in part, that “history has demonstrated that the Middle East region is likely to lurch from crisis to crisis without sustained diplomatic and economic engagement by the United States.”

In an interview March 24, Leach amended that statement. “I would say not only *without* our engagement, [but] ... with
or
without our engagement.”

That revision is a reflection of all that has happened in just the past few years: the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine; developments regarding Iran’s nuclear program; the Arab Spring; turmoil in Egypt; and the Syrian civil war – the last of which has grown more complicated given newly escalated tension between Russia and the West.

It also hints at a frustration Leach clearly has with American foreign policy in the region – and not merely the long, costly war with Iraq.

Sparking Peace or Conflict? Jim Leach Discusses the Middle East, April 10 at St. Ambrose

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So when Leach presents his lecture “What is Old, New, & Unprecedented in America’s Relationships with the Middle East” on April 10, he’ll have a lot to talk to about. (The speech is the first public event of St. Ambrose University’s new Middle East Institute.) But don’t expect many answers.

Take the example of Syria. Perhaps the United States should have provided military hardware to anti-government forces earlier, Leach said, but “there’s no necessary certitude that that would have made a difference.” (Syria could turn out to be another example of short-sighted United States policy with long-term negative effects. In 2012, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that arms sent to Syrian rebels – with the aid of the United States – “are going to hard-line Islamic jihadists, and not the more secular opposition groups that the West wants to bolster.” The article questions whether the U.S. “strategy of minimal and indirect intervention in the Syrian conflict” is “sowing the seeds of future insurgencies hostile to the United States.”)

As for the current situation, Leach said: “We have a humanitarian trauma of seldom precedented scale.” And while the current government of Bashar al-Assad should not “be supported or allowed to continue, ... I’m not of an ilk that thinks necessarily that intervention is a wise course of action. There are a lot of counterproductive things that can devolve from intervening in a society in which you have these extraordinary religious cleavages” between Shia and Sunni Muslims. For example, he said, “people of like religious faith in so many other countries in the Middle East lining up on one side or the other. If America comes down on one side of a religious battle, it could be that people on the other side will have reason to intensify conflict in the region or out of the region.”

So should the United States just *let* these terrible things continue? “There’s no ‘letting,’” Leach said. “Can we stop it? Do you have a technique? ... We have an awful civil war and we have a humanitarian crisis. [But] the capacity to intervene constructively is limited.”

Generally speaking, Leach said, “we have the potential to play a constructive role [in the Middle East]. And we also have the potential of being counterproductive. ... I would argue that we have been less productive than we should have been, and downright counterproductive in certain circumstances.”

But Leach was vague on what that constructive role is – and in our interview could not give examples of recent U.S. policy that furthered stability in the region. “We have sparked possibly a democratic movement in the Middle East – the so-called Arab Spring,” he said, “but we’ve

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also sparked a much darker set of religious conflicts.”

That’s a function, he said, of the Middle East’s complexity – which few American administrative, military, and legislative leaders fully understand. “Change may be a hallmark of our age everywhere,” Leach said. “But the Middle East itself is exceptionally unique,” in part because of deep religious divisions within countries. “One might say there’s a lot of change in Russia today, but it’s of a very different dimension than the change in the Middle East, which is incredibly profound and relates to very precise individual-country issues as well as inter- and intra-religious conflict, as well as democratic versus autocratic politics.”

Yet the United States can’t stand to the side. “I’m not an isolationist,” Leach said. “But I am skeptical of militaristic policies which are not rooted in a deep understanding of regions, and where the direct national interest of the United States is not ... in peril. That does not mean that one doesn’t use other means of engagement.”

The challenge, he said, is trying to figure out what will happen or might happen because of specific actions – whether they’re diplomatic, financial, or military. And to determine the costs and benefits of *inaction*. “We have an effect by refusing to engage,” Leach said. “It is really hard to measure in advance effects, especially when policymakers are not deeply rooted in the history and the culture of the region.”

Leach, who was born and grew up in Davenport, finished his 30-year career representing eastern Iowa in the U.S. House in 2007, after losing his seat to Dave Loebsack. (He was [chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 2009 to 2013](#), and he now [serves as a visiting professor of law and a senior scholar at the University of Iowa](#).)

In Congress, Leach was not a GOP hawk. In 2002, he was one of six House Republicans to vote against authorizing force against Iraq.

In 1991, he had supported the first Gulf War – which he said successfully countered Saddam Hussein’s naked aggression against Kuwait.

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But, he said, 11 years later “we were back in Iraq on a decision on our part, not based upon on act on their part.” Leach certainly deserves credit for his foresight, as he opposed the war before it was widely accepted that the premises for military action were untrue (the claimed involvement of Iraq in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks) or based on false information (the country’s biological- and nuclear-weapons programs). “We had an enormous intelligence failure and a propaganda initiative that didn’t do us proud,” Leach said.

And while the U.S. might have found the Iraqi regime deplorable, he added: “There are many dictators in the world. We don’t attack them all.”

In response to nearly all my questions, Leach focused on military intervention. “I am one that is extremely doubtful that direct U.S. engagement in another war in the Middle East is likely to be constructive,” he said.

But, as he emphasized, military action is but one possible tool. Yet the United States hasn’t used other options well, either: “I personally think we’ve advanced policies that have, in the short term at least, proven to be counterproductive.” Leach didn’t provide examples, but the U.S. support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq conflict – in the forms of financial aid, training, and weapons – stands out given the two wars that followed against Saddam Hussein’s regime.

I asked what recent diplomatic and financial/trade actions by the United States in the Middle East had increased stability or resulted in positive change. Leach’s answer was instructively cautious.

He noted that the U.S. had a minor role in the Libyan revolution, but “whether that’s going to prove to be productive or counterproductive, time will tell.”

He also cited brokering negotiations between Palestine and Israel. Earlier in our conversation, he said it was incumbent on the U.S. to “precipitate discussions that might have a chance to lead to some sort of *modus vivendi* that is more peaceful than currently exists.” But in response to this question, he said: “To date that record is disappointing and in some cases disappointing to the point of truly being tragic.”

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I asked about Iran's agreement to freeze aspects of its nuclear program in exchange for relaxed sanctions, and Leach was similarly circumspect: "It's a step forward. Whether it's simply one of [Iran] buying a little time or something more serious, we don't know yet. I think these are the types of negotiations that ought to be pressed. Whether the result is as good as we'd want, no."

Jim Leach will present his lecture on Thursday, April 10, at 7 p.m. in St. Ambrose's Christ the King Chapel. The event is free and open to the public.

For more information about St. Ambrose's Middle East Institute, visit SAU.edu/mei.