

# Iraq War's 'Trifecta of Failure'

Official Washington likes to pretend that the neocon-driven Iraq War "surge" secured a "victory," rather than face the evidence of a multi-faceted failure. But the news of an Iraqi arms deal with Moscow underscores the scope of the U.S. policy disaster, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, sales of munitions were a major instrument that the Soviet Union used, most conspicuously in the Middle East, to cultivate influence and close ties with other regimes. Such sales also had obvious benefits for the Soviet arms industry.

In addition to such clients as Egypt and Syria, Iraq became a major customer after a military coup in 1958 led by General Abdel Karim Kassem ended the Iraqi monarchy. Kassem lifted a ban on the Iraqi Communist Party, severed Iraq's security ties with the West (which had included membership in the Baghdad Pact), and turned to the USSR as his principal security patron and arms supplier.

Kassem lost his power and his life when a Baathist coup overthrew him in 1963. The United States had good information about the coup plot and evidently smiled on it, out of concern over growing communist influence under Kassem.

Several years of instability and short-lived regimes in Iraq followed until the Baath Party regained control and Saddam Hussein emerged from it to establish his dictatorship. The Soviets sold plenty more arms to Iraq under the Baathists, regardless of what U.S. officials may have hoped for in 1958.

Moscow's arms market in Iraq was disrupted when the U.S. invasion overthrew Saddam. But now the current Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki has concluded a contract to buy Russian arms worth more than \$4.2 billion, according to a joint statement issued after negotiations between Maliki and Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The deal features attack helicopters and surface-to-air missile systems.

Further discussions under way between Russia and Iraq aim at additional arms sales that would include MiG-29 fighters, more helicopters and other heavy weaponry. The Russians of today, like the Soviets of yesteryear, do not seem to have any of the compunctions, which sometimes figure into American deliberations about arms exports, including to Iraq, about the recipient's human-rights record or other political conditions in the recipient country. It is not out of the question for Russia to replace the United States in the foreseeable future as

Iraq's largest arms supplier.

We can draw several implications from this news. One is that it fills in further the picture of what legacy was left in Iraq by the U.S. war that ousted Saddam. The regime that emerged from the rubble is not only increasingly authoritarian and narrowly sectarian and not only chummy with Iran; it also is becoming a client of Moscow. A trifecta of failure.

A second lesson concerns the notion that committing military support to a new regime in the making is essential for having a good relationship with it and to be considered a friend rather than an adversary once such a regime comes to power. This idea is being heard increasingly as an argument for doing more to assist rebels in Syria.

We need to get in on the ground floor with the new bunch and accept risks and commit major resources, it is said, in order to be held in favor by whatever regime emerges from *that* rubble. But the United States got in on the ground floor more than once in Iraq, with the Baathists in 1958 and with the successors to Saddam after he was overthrown. In the latter case it did so with the expenditure of enormous resources. And look how much friendship and influence it bought.

Finally, the fact that Iraq's latest turn is reminiscent of what happened in the late 1950s suggests that the arrow of time in the Middle East does not point as much in one direction as many like to think it does. The progression of events there, even with pushes or leadership by the United States, does not necessarily run in the direction of more political freedom, more free enterprise, or whatever.

Maybe in thinking about this we can get help not from the monotheistic religions of the Middle East but instead from religions of South Asia, the ones that envision a wheel of life on which we keep going round and round. Buddhists would say it is possible in a sense to get off the wheel, but only through self-enlightenment and not through a push from someone else.

This is what Thomas Friedman seems to be saying in [his column](#) on Wednesday when he writes, "the Middle East only puts a smile on your face when change starts with them [i.e., Middle Easterners], not us."

Think about that the next time someone talks about how the Middle East would be more to our liking if the United States would only be more assertive there.

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## Romney's Middle East Militancy

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney put some space between himself and President Obama on Middle East policies by suggesting a return of U.S. troops to Iraq and drawing the "red line" for Iran around the fuzzy concept of nuclear "capability," notes Adil E. Shamoo for Foreign Policy in Focus.

By Adil E. Shamoo

Mitt [Romney's foreign policy speech](#) at the Virginia Military Institute, while trotted out as a major rejection of the current administration's approach to the Middle East, mostly just rehashed President Obama's policies, albeit with more hawkish bravado.

But Romney's speech also included a host of faulty assumptions about Arabs and Muslims, indicating a potentially reckless misunderstanding of America's relationship with the Muslim world.



Romney purported to be shocked that some Muslims reacted violently against the United States after the release of a video insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Romney and his [key foreign policy advisers](#) apparently do not recognize that anti-American sentiment was already [sky-high](#) among Middle Eastern countries, with nearly all the polls indicating single-digit approval ratings of U.S. policy in the region.

The small group of genuinely extremist organizations like al-Qaeda takes advantage of this deeper reservoir of anti-Americanism in the broader society, a phenomenon that Romney and his advisers don't seem to comprehend. Certainly, there's a reason we do not see comparably violent demonstrations from Muslims in

Europe or the United States.

I am glad that Mr. Romney recognizes that most Arabs are not violently anti-American and mourn the loss of the U.S. ambassador in Libya. Romney correctly states that there's a regional "struggle between liberty and tyranny, justice and oppression, hope and despair."

But Romney, like many conservatives and liberal interventionists, fails to recognize that U.S. foreign policy in the region has been a primary driver of this despair. We continue to support oppressive dictators in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Bahrain, in addition to our invasion of Iraq and our naked support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Against all reason, Romney wants to send U.S. troops back to Iraq, where the unjustifiable U.S. invasion and occupation have already caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and caused untold destruction. Never mind that the Iraqis did not want our troops then and certainly do not want them now. If Romney is worried about al-Qaeda in Iraq, maybe he should tell our "friends" in Saudi Arabia to stop bankrolling them.

On Afghanistan, whatever else he says, Romney's policy is ostensibly synonymous with Obama's: bring most of the troops home in 2014 as planned. In North Africa, Romney says he will put strings on U.S. aid to Egypt. This is not so different from the Obama administration's policy, since U.S. aid to the civilian government of Egypt is so small (\$0.25 billion) compared to U.S. aid to the Egyptian military (\$1.25 billion).

Mr. Romney and his advisers would like us to send arms to the opposition in Syria, which he hopes will go to the right group. The Obama administration is already sending supplies and facilitating arms distribution from U.S. allies. However, we should not forget that the arms the United States sent to the Taliban in the 1980s are being used against us today.

Romney says the United States must "prevent [Iran] from acquiring nuclear weapons capability." The only nuance he added to the Obama administration's current policy is the word "capability." Since the word is amorphous and can be interpreted many different ways, Romney's policy is ambiguous at best, but also could be risky.

If Romney's bar for capability is so low as to oppose Iran's production of radioactive isotopes for medical use, it could well be that President Romney plans to go to war with Iran post-haste.

Finally, Romney endorsed the two-state solution in Israel-Palestine. This is exactly Obama's policy but contrary to Romney's own cynicism about the issue

captured in the infamous “47-percent” video in May.

Most of Romney’s pronouncements on the Middle East are old and tired policies merely dressed up in hawkish new garb. The most disturbing element is the campaign’s utter misunderstanding of Arab history and the roots of anti-American sentiment in the region. Without understanding the present, how can Romney expect to shepherd in the future?

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## Romney Tests the Limits on Lying

Americans may see themselves as worldly cynics when it comes to political lying, observing that all politicians do it. But Mitt Romney is testing the limits with his ever-shifting positions and outright lies, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Mitt Romney might be the most brazen political liar since James Polk, who served as the 11th U.S. president (1845-1849) and lied through his teeth to Congress, to his cabinet, to the newspapers to get the country into a war with Mexico.

Of course, other presidents have lied to a similar end, for instance President Lyndon Johnson on the Vietnam War and President George W. Bush on the Iraq War. But Polk operated with the same audacious “lying is part of what I do” disposition that Mitt Romney does.

If one has any doubt about Mitt Romney’s mendacious temperament, the first presidential debate should have put it to rest. According to one analyst, Romney let loose with “27 myths in 38 minutes,” finishing with a big grin after most of these prevarications. He produced trumped-up assertions, false statistics and wild exaggerations about taxes, energy independence, job creation, the deficit, Medicare, “Obamacare,” and military spending.

If the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri came back to life today and produced an updated list of lost souls for the “Inferno” section of his Divine Comedy, Romney would certainly earn a spot in the 8th rung of hell. That is where Dante placed, among others, the “falsifiers, those who attempted to alter things through lies or alchemy.” Their punishment was “based on horrible diseases such

as rashes, dropsy, leprosy and consumption.”

By the way, there seems to be a suspicion that Romney also cheated during the first debate. The debate rules say that the candidates cannot use “prepared notes.” However, a video of the debate shows that he had put what looks like a white piece of paper down on his podium, or maybe it was just his handkerchief. But who could believe that Romney might cheat?

### **Some Specifics**

The second presidential debate, scheduled for Oct. 16, will be partially about foreign policy. As a run-up to the moment, Romney gave a speech on foreign affairs. It should be kept in mind that between Oct. 8th and Oct. 16 he might completely change his positions. The man has such a flip-flop record that this is quite possible.

However, assuming he doesn't do that, let's take a look at just how truthful are his foreign policy statements:

As Robert Parry points out in Consortium News, Romney lied when he said Obama “has not signed one new free trade agreement in the past four years.” Obama has in fact signed three (South Korea, Panama and Columbia). Romney also lied when he said that Obama was “silent” during the suppression of demonstrations in Iran after the reelection of President Amadinejad. Obama spoke out on multiple occasions.

By the way, one might not approve of NAFTA-style trade agreements. I certainly don't. But that does not make Romney's lies about Obama's actions acceptable.

Parry goes on to detail how Romney's accusation that Obama's foreign policy is “weak” is groundless. After all, he is talking about the man who wages war in Afghanistan, helped bring down the dictatorship in Libya, and took down Osama bin Laden. Parry explains that Romney credits a lot of this to the U.S. military as if Obama had nothing to do with it.

Once more, Obama's foreign policy has much about it that can be criticized. So, why do it through sheer falsehoods? Perhaps because Romney actually has no problem with Obama's actions, but does not want the public to associate them with the president.

Then there is Romney's sudden embracing of a Palestinian state when just a few months ago he described such a goal as “almost unthinkable to accomplish.” At that time the reason he gave for his position was that Palestinians are not interested in peace. That was an outrageous lie.

It is hard to believe that he has now changed his mind. More likely he is attempting to preclude any charge that he has abandoned the search for peace, even as he asserts that Obama has not displayed leadership toward that same end.

When it comes to the Arab Spring, Obama allegedly missed “an historic opportunity to win new friends and share our values in the Middle East.” Who would these friends be? Those fighting against “evil tyrants and angry mobs who seek to harm us.”

This is so much gobbledygook. Most of the evil tyrants are our longstanding old friends and the angry mobs are the only hope for any governmental improvement.

Parry points out that the real difference between Romney and Obama is that Romney is much more the militarist. He has embraced neocon advisers, given carte blanche to Israel and verbally attacked Russia as “without question, our No. 1 geopolitical foe.”

All of this suggests that between Obama (who is certainly no saint and has plenty of blood on his own hands) and Romney, it is the latter who is more likely to get the nation into yet another war. As Juan Cole has observed, “wars and lots of other conflicts are not a foreign policy vision, they are a nightmare.”

### **Does Lying Work?**

So, does this serial falsification work? Can it actually help get a mythomaniac elected president? It seems that the answer is yes.

According to a Pew Research Center poll taken after the first Obama-Romney debate, “It’s official. Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney erased President Barack Obama’s lead.” According to a graph of the poll results Romney’s picked up five percentage points to come even with Obama. Sixty-four percent of voters “thought that Romney was more informative than President Obama.”

The liar is more informative!?! How is that possible? Well, you start with a lot of ignorance. The ignorance is not a function of lack of intelligence, but a function of lack of accurate contextual knowledge.

As a consequence the level of understanding of the average American about government policy on national issues such as health care, energy independence, job creation, the deficit, military spending and even taxes is considerably lower than their average IQ. It is even worse when we get to foreign policy and its formulation.

Into the resulting knowledge vacuum come the misleading statements and assertions of politicians, so-called experts, and media spokesman of all descriptions. Fox News has made millions of dollars selling advertising that accompanies biased opinion passed off as fact.

In the end what the majority of Americans think they know about both domestic and foreign policy is based on media hear-say. Romney's assertive and stylized lying fits well into this scenario. And his style also passes for strength and self-confidence.

### **Is it Pathological?**

Romney's lying is so pervasive, so ever-present, that one starts to wonder if it is pathological. There is a mental illness characterized by habitual lying. It goes by the name of Pseudologia Fantastica. Here are some of the characteristics of this ailment:

- a. The lies told "are not entirely improbable" and "upon confrontation, the teller can admit them to be untrue, even if unwillingly." In other words, the liar is aware that he or she is lying.
- b. The lies told cast the teller in a favorable light.
- c. The tendency to lie is a long-lasting one and not the product of the moment. It reflects an innate trait of the personality.

Well, Romney fits this pattern when it comes to the first two traits. It is hard to tell about the third. We will have to await the in-depth biographies that are certain to hit the market in short order. However, there is no doubt that the man has an easy facility for lying. One doubts if it keeps him up at night.

When the powerful lie it is a problem for all of us. That is because we do not usually act on the basis of what is true. Rather we act on the basis of what we think is true. When it comes to foreign policy, what the powerful and the media tell us is what most of us accept as true.

This distinction between what is true and what we think is true is critically important. If what we believe is true approximates the reality outside of us, then our plans and actions usually work out. If, however, what we think is true is off the mark, we can end up walking right off a cliff.

In the last 50 years Americans have been walking off cliffs quite regularly, with the result that millions have been killed and maimed. They have done so in large part because they have a hard time knowing when they are being lied to, especially about foreign policy.



If the Pew poll cited above is any predictor, nothing is going to change any time soon. Elect Mitt Romney and that walk toward the cliff might turn into a run. Reelect Obama, and the cliff will probably remain our self-destructive destination, but perhaps the pace will be more measured.

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