A Force for Good: America Reinvigorated in the Middle East

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Thank you, Frank. Thank you to Frank Ricciardone. Thank you for your service to America as well, in addition to the duties that you perform here.

I’ve had the good fortune to be a frequent visitor here to Egypt and the Middle East as Secretary of State. In my prior role as CIA director, I was here with some frequency, and I came here too as a member of Congress. Every time I come, I get to see something new, something wonderful.

This trip is especially meaningful for me as an evangelical Christian, coming so soon after the Coptic Church’s Christmas celebrations. This is an important time. We’re all children of Abraham: Christians, Muslims, Jews. In my office, I keep a Bible open on my desk to remind me of God and His Word, and The Truth.

And it’s the truth, lower-case “t,” that I’m here to talk about today. It is a truth that isn’t often spoken in this part of the world, but because I’m a military man by training, I’ll be very blunt and direct today: America is a force for good in the Middle East.

We need to acknowledge that truth, because if we don’t, we make bad choices – now and in the future. And our choices, the choices we make today have consequences for nations, and for millions and millions of people, for our safety, for our economic prosperity, for our personal freedoms, and those of our children.

And there’s no more appropriate place than where I’m standing today to have this discussion at the American University here in beautiful Cairo. As Frank said, this year marks 100 years since the founding of this institution, and the AUC is more than just a university. It is an important symbol of America’s friendship with Egypt and what binds our people together. Together, we’ve created a modern place of learning in the midst of an ancient civilization with its own rich history of artists, poets, and intellectuals.

Egypt has always been a land of striving. And yet at times, your aspirations and those of your brethren in the Middle East have seemed impossible to achieve. These lands witnessed convulsions from Tunis to Tehran as old systems crumbled and new ones struggled to emerge. That’s happened here, too.

And at this critical moment, America, your long-time friend, was absent too much. Why? Because our leaders gravely misread our history, and your historical moment. These fundamental misunderstandings, set forth in this city in 2009, adversely affected the lives of hundreds of millions of people in Egypt and all across the region.

Remember: It was here, here in this city, that another American stood before you.

He told you that radical Islamist terrorism does not stem from an ideology.

He told you that 9/11 led my country to abandon its ideals, particularly in the Middle East.

He told you that the United States and the Muslim world needed, quote, “a new beginning,” end of quote.

The results of these misjudgments have been dire.

In falsely seeing ourselves as a force for what ails the Middle East, we were timid in asserting ourselves when the times – and our partners – demanded it.

We grossly underestimated the tenacity and viciousness of radical Islamism, a debauched strain of the faith that seeks to upend every other form of worship or governance. ISIS drove to the outskirts of Baghdad as America hesitated. They raped and pillaged and murdered tens of thousands of innocents. They birthed a caliphate across Syria and Iraq and launched terror attacks that killed all across continents.

America’s reluctance, our reluctance, to wield our influence kept us silent as the people of Iran rose up against the mullahs in Tehran in the Green Revolution. The ayatollahs and their henchmen murdered, jailed, and intimidated freedom-loving Iranians, and they wrongly blamed America for this unrest when it was their own tyranny that had fueled it. Emboldened, the regime spread its cancerous influence to Yemen, to Iraq, to Syria, and still further into Lebanon.

Our penchant, America’s penchant, for wishful thinking led us to look the other way as Hizballah, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Iranian regime, accumulated a massive arsenal of approximately 130,000 rockets and missiles. They stored and positioned these weapons in Lebanese towns and villages in flagrant violation of international law. That arsenal is aimed squarely at our ally Israel.

When Bashar Assad unleashed terror upon ordinary Syrians and barrel-bombed civilians with sarin gas, a true echo of Saddam Hussein’s gassing of the Kurdish people, we condemned his actions. But in our hesitation to wield power, we did nothing.

Our eagerness to address only Muslims and not nations ignored the rich diversity of the Middle East and frayed old bonds. It undermined the concept of the nation-state, the building block of international stability. And our desire for peace at any cost led us to strike a deal with Iran, our common enemy.

So today, what did we learn from all of this? We learned that when America retreats, chaos often follows. When we neglect our friends, resentment builds. And when we partner with enemies, they advance.

The good news. The good news is this: The age of self-inflicted American shame is over, and so are the policies that produced so much needless suffering. Now comes the real new beginning.

In just 24 months, actually less than two years, the United States under President Trump has reasserted its traditional role as a force for good in this region. We’ve learned from our mistakes. We’ve rediscovered our voice. We’ve rebuilt our relationships. We’ve rejected false overtures from our enemies.

And look at what we’ve accomplished. Look at what we’ve accomplished together. Under new leadership, America has confronted the ugly reality of radical Islamism. On President Trump’s very first trip abroad to this region, he called on Muslim-majority nations to, quote, “meet history’s great test – to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism.”

President Sisi joined us. He joined us in denouncing the twisted ideology which has brought death and suffering on so many. I thank President Sisi for his courage. (Applause.)

As I said in a recent speech that I gave in Brussels, our words mean something again, and they should. West Point taught me a basic code of integrity. If we commit American prestige to an action, our allies depend on us to follow through.

The Trump administration did not stand idly by when Bashar Assad used chemical weapons against his people. Indeed, President Trump unleashed the fury of the U.S. military not once, but twice, with allied support. And he’s willing to do it again, although we do hope that he does not have to.

For those who fret about the use of American power, remember this: America has always been, and always will be, a liberating force, not an occupying power. We’ve never dreamed of domination in the Middle East. Can you say the same about Iran?

In World War II, American GIs helped free North America[[i]](https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/01/288410.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn1) from Nazi occupation. Fifty years later, we assembled a coalition to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein. Would the Russians or Chinese come to your rescue in the same way, the way that we have?

And when the mission is over, when the job is complete, America leaves. Today in Iraq, at the government’s invitation, we have approximately 5,000 troops where there were once 166,000. We once had tens of thousands of U.S. military stationed – personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia. Now that number is a tiny fraction. When we do set up major bases, as we’ve done in Bahrain, in Kuwait, in Qatar, and in Turkey and the Emirates, it’s at the invitation of the host country.

In that same spirit, just last year, America bolstered a coalition of allies and partners to dismantle the Islamic State’s caliphate, liberating Iraqis, Syrians, Arabs and Kurds, Muslims and Christians, men, women, and children. President Trump empowered our commanders in the field to strike ISIS quicker and harder than ever before. And now 99 percent of the territory ISIS once held is liberated. Life is returning to normal for millions of Iraqis and Syrians. Nations in the global coalition should all be enormously proud of this achievement. Together we have saved thousands of lives.

Our allies and partners have helped greatly in the counter-ISIS effort. France and Britain joined our strikes on Syria and have supported our anti-terror effort around the world. Jordan and Turkey have hosted millions of Syrians fleeing violence. Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries have generously contributed towards stabilization efforts. We thank all of them for their help, and we urge them to continue.

The United States has also helped liberated areas as an important means of preventing the caliphate from re-emerging. We have provided $2.5 billion in humanitarian assistance to Iraq since 2014, and our churches and non-profits do good work there every day as well. We and our allies generated nearly 30 billion in grants and financing support to aid Iraq’s reconstruction during the Kuwait Reconstruction Conference just this past year.

Think about the people we’re helping. Last year, I hosted the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington. At that conference, our ambassador-at-large recounted his trip to Iraq. There he met Yezidi women who had been sold into bondage, whose children had been ripped out of their arms. Life under ISIS was real hell, a living hell on Earth. Today, those areas are liberated, thanks to our coalition’s power and might and commitment.

I recall a line from your late Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz. Quote: “Good is achieving victory every day. It may even be that Evil is weaker than we imagine.”

Let’s turn to Iran.

President Trump has reversed our willful blindness to the danger of the regime and withdrew from the failed nuclear deal, with its false promises. The U.S. re-imposed sanctions that should never have been lifted. We embarked on a new pressure campaign to cut off the revenues the regime uses to spread terror and destruction throughout the world. We joined the Iranian people in calling for freedom and accountability.

And importantly, we fostered a common understanding with our allies of the need to counteract the Iran regime’s revolutionary agenda. Countries increasingly understand that we must confront the ayatollahs, not coddle them. Nations are rallying to our side to confront the regime like never before. Egypt, Oman, Kuwait, and Jordan have all been instrumental in thwarting Iran’s efforts to evade sanctions.

The UAE has canceled its imports of Iranian condensate following the re-imposition of American sanctions. Bahrain has exposed the Revolutionary Guard proxies that are active in its country, and which – and working – is working to stop Iran’s illicit maritime activities in its region. Saudi Arabia, too, has worked with us to counter Iranian expansion and regional influence. We, the United States, commend each of these efforts, and we seek for all nations to continue the work to constrain the full array of the regime’s malign activity.

The work to curb the regime’s deadly ambitions isn’t confined to the Middle East. America’s friends and partners from South Korea to Poland have joined our effort to stop Iran’s wave of regional destruction and global campaigns of terror.

Countries across the globe have cut Iranian oil imports to zero and are working towards that goal. Private companies in France, Germany, Britain and elsewhere have all calculated that enriching themselves through work with the regime is bad for business and bad for the people of their own countries.

In Yemen, we’ve assisted our coalition partners as they take the lead in preventing an Iranian expansion that would be disastrous for world trade and regional security. As is always the case with America, our engagement has also been coupled with robust humanitarian aid. We’ve supported the UN talks to put Yemen on the path to peace.

In Lebanon, Hizballah remains a major presence, but we won’t accept this status quo. Our aggressive sanctions campaign against Iran is also directed at the terror group and its leaders, including the son of Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hizballah.

Now let’s talk about America’s efforts to build coalition.

The Trump administration has moved quickly to rebuild links amongst our old friends and nurture new partnerships. My very first trip in this job included stops in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

In fact, after being sworn in as Secretary of State, I visited those countries before I ever went to my office in Washington, D.C. And I welcome your leaders to my office often, as I did with Foreign Minister Shoukry in August of last year.

Coalition building for America is natural, but in past years we’ve neglected it. This administration has enjoyed fruitful relationships in the Middle East for hundreds of years, but we must keep them and work to keep them. Look, our ties stem back a long ways – with Morocco and Oman, back to 1777 and 1833. And our friendship with the country in which we are today, Egypt, stems back generations. Indeed, this year marks the 70th anniversary of our diplomatic relations with Jordan. We’re building out a healthy dialogue with the Government of Iraq, a thriving and young democracy. We’re also building relationships for our shared prosperity. It is time for old rivalries to end for the sake of the greater good of the region.

The Trump administration is also working to establish the Middle East Strategic Alliance to confront the region’s most serious threat and bolster energy and economic cooperation. This effort is bringing together members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as Egypt and Jordan. Today, we ask each of those countries to take the next step and help us solidify MESA.

We’re also seeing remarkable change. New bonds are taking root that were unimaginable until very recently. Who could’ve believed a few years ago that an Israeli prime minister would visit Muscat? Or that new ties would emerge between Saudi Arabia and Iraq? Or that a Roman Catholic pope would visit this city to meet with Muslim imams and the head of the Coptic faith?

In October of last year, the Israeli national anthem played as an Israeli judo champion was crowned the winner of a tournament in the United Arab Emirates. It was the first time – the first time – that an Israeli delegation was allowed to participate under its own national flag. It was also the first time that an Israeli culture and sports minister attended a sports event in the Gulf. She said, and I quote, “It is a dream come true. For two years we had talks in order to reach this moment.” It was hard for her to stop the tears. “I want to thank the authorities in Abu Dhabi and our hosts here who received us in an exemplary manner.” She could not have been happier.

These steps toward rapprochement are necessary for greater security in the face of our shared threats, and they also hint at a much brighter future for the region.

Of course our work together is not finished. It’s almost never America’s work alone. The U.S. knows that we can’t, and shouldn’t, fight every fight or sustain every economy. No nation wants to be dependent on another. Our aim – our aim – is to partner with our friends and vigorously oppose our enemies, because a strong, secure, and economically vibrant Middle East is in our national interest, and it’s in yours as well.

Let me be clear: America will not retreat until the terror fight is over. We will labor tirelessly alongside you to defeat ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other jihadists that threaten our security and yours. President Trump has made the decision to bring our troops home from Syria. We always do and now is the time, but this isn’t a change of mission. We remain committed to the complete dismantling of ISIS – the ISIS threat – and the ongoing fight against radical Islamism in all of its forms. But as President Trump has said, we’re looking to our partners to do more, and in this effort we will do so going forward together.

For our part, airstrikes in the region will continue as targets arise. We will keep working with our partners in the Coalition to Defeat ISIS. We will continue to hunt down terrorists who seek safe havens in Libya and in Yemen. We strongly support Egypt’s efforts to destroy ISIS in the Sinai. We strongly support Israel’s efforts to stop Tehran from turning Syria into the next Lebanon.

And as the fighting continues, we will continue to assist our partners in efforts to guard borders, prosecute terrorists, screen travelers, assist refugees, and more. But “assist” is the key phrase. We ask every peace-loving nation of the Middle East to shoulder new responsibilities for defeating Islamist extremism wherever we find it.

It is important to know also that we will not ease our campaign to stop Iran’s malevolent influence and actions against this region and the world. The nations of the Middle East will never enjoy security, achieve economic stability, or advance the dreams of their people if Iran’s revolutionary regime persists on its current course**.**

February 11th will mark 40 years since the oppressive regime came to power in Tehran. America’s economic sanctions against the regime are the strongest in history, and will keep getting tougher until Iran starts behaving like a normal country. The 12 demands that we stated in May remain in force, because the regime’s threat to the region endures.

In Syria, the United States will use diplomacy and work with our partners to expel every last Iranian boot, and work through the UN-led process to bring peace and stability to the long-suffering Syrian people. There will be no U.S. reconstruction assistance for areas of Syria held by Assad until Iran and its proxy forces withdraw and until we see irreversible progress towards a political resolution.

In Lebanon, the United States will work to reduce the threat of Hizballah’s missile arsenal, which is aimed at Israel and can reach all points inside of that country. Many of these rockets are equipped with advance guidance systems, courtesy of Iran, and that’s unacceptable. Iran may think it owns Lebanon. Iran is wrong.

In Iraq, the United States will help our partners build a nation free of Iranian influence. This past May, Iraqis rejected sectarianism in a national election, and we will support that wholeheartedly. The people there refused to be cowered by Iranian-backed thugs and armed groups. Iraqis have strengthened ties with Arab neighbors, peacefully resumed cooperation between the Kurdish Region and Baghdad, and have renewed their focus on fighting corruption.

And in Yemen, we will continue to work for a lasting peace.

And I think this is clear, but it is worth reiterating: The United States fully supports Israel’s right to defend itself against the Iranian regime’s aggressive adventurism. We will continue to ensure that Israel has the military capacity to do so decisively.

The Trump administration will also continue to press for a real and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Again, we’ve adhered to our word. President Trump campaigned on the promise to recognize Jerusalem – the seat of Israel’s government – as the nation’s capital. In May, we moved our embassy there. These decisions honor a bipartisan congressional resolution from more than two decades ago. President Trump acted on this commitment.

The United States also is working to keep our bilateral relationships strong. Over the next few days, I’ll hold in-depth discussions with the leaders of Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait. We’ll talk about our shared goals, just as I did in Jordan and Iraq this week, and as I did today with President Sisi and Foreign Minister Shoukry.

And as we seek an even stronger partnership with Egypt, we encourage President Sisi to unleash the creative energy of Egypt’s people, unfetter the economy, and promote a free and open exchange of ideas. The progress made to date can continue.

I also applaud President Sisi’s efforts to promote religious freedom, which stands as an example for all leaders and all peoples of the Middle East. I was happy to see our citizens, wrongly convicted of improperly operating NGOs here, finally be acquitted. And we strongly support President Sisi’s initiative to amend Egyptian law so that this does not happen again. More work certainly needs to be done to maximize the potential of the Egyptian nation and its people. I’m glad that America will be a partner in those efforts.

Let me close here with a couple of final thoughts.

First, it’s never easy to recognize truth. But when we see it, we must speak it. America has been criticized for doing too much in the Middle East, and we’ve been criticized for doing too little. But one thing we’ve never been is an empire-builder or an oppressor.

Just look at our history together, the history which I have recounted today. Look at our fights against common enemies. Look at our coalition building. And finally, just look around you at this university, which has existed now for a century. It’s not a coincidence that many other American universities like this one thrive all across the Middle East, from Beirut to Sulaymaniyah. These are symbols of America’s innate goodness, of our hopes for you, and of the better future we desire for all nations of the Middle East.

I want to thank you all for being here today, and may the good Lord bless each and every one of you. Thank you. (Applause.)