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Emma Ashford: In fight against Islamic State, U.S. would be better off without its Arab allies

By Emma Ashford

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U.S. officials continue to insist that our Middle Eastern allies are crucial to the fight against Islamic State and to other Middle Eastern conflicts. But are they? To judge by the chaos their help has created in Syria, we'd be better off without them.

The extensive and haphazard actions of some Persian Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in the Syrian civil war were driven by their desire to remove President Bashar Assad from power. Yet these authoritarian states lacked the foreign policy, military or intelligence tools needed to undertake such ambitious foreign policy.

Their involvement in Syria over the last few years has fragmented the Syrian opposition, promoted sectarianism and put money and weapons into the hands of extremist fighters, creating fertile ground for the growth of Islamic State.

Tiny Qatar, for example, lacking any on-the-ground knowledge of Syria, turned to Syrian expatriates in Doha for fighters and organization. It then funded many small brigades, each headed by a different commander from among these Syrian expats. This system provided no incentive for rebel groups to work together to overthrow Assad. Instead, it encouraged them to compete against one another for money.

Saudi Arabia initially funneled its financial support to the moderate Free Syrian Army. Frustrated that Assad wasn't toppled quickly, it then shuttled money to Islamist groups as well. Even as the Islamists and FSA began to fight each other, the Saudis kept supplying money to both sides.

Further, arms deliveries to moderate groups were slow to arrive.

This forced them to seek private funding from wealthy citizens of the Persian Gulf states, who tended to support sectarian causes. Donations flowed primarily to Islamists, and encouraged less radical groups to emphasize Islamist credentials.

America's Middle Eastern allies also proved unwilling -- and later unable -- to crack down on their private citizens' funding of extremists in Syria. Leaders in many Gulf states turned a blind eye to the fact that money collected by Salafi clerics for "humanitarian" relief in Syria was in fact going to military purposes. Only in 2013 did Saudi Arabia finally ban its citizens from funding rebel groups directly, a prohibition that has had little effect.

Worse, these governments often couldn't maintain control over the supplies they sent into Syria, meaning arms and cash found their way into the hands of radicals. Qatar in particular rarely vetted the recipients of their aid.

Many factors have, of course, contributed to the Syrian disaster and the rise of Islamic State. Still, it's hard to dispute that the incompetent interference of states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar made the conflict become more extreme. As Vice President Joe Biden noted in an off-the-cuff remark, "Our allies in the region were our biggest problem. ... The people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and al-Qaida."

The White House made Biden apologize to several Middle Eastern leaders for speaking that truth.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry asserted in September that "Arab nations play a critical role in (the) coalition." Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, asked about Qatari funding for extremists by the House Armed Services Committee just two weeks ago, replied that "not everything our partners do in the region are things that we support or we think are constructive," but then said, "We can continue to work with them on areas where we disagree."

His message was clear: The United States will not challenge its Middle Eastern allies, even when they purposefully undermine U.S. interests.

Yet as their many failures and fixations in Syria show, states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar are unreliable and capricious allies. As other regional issues escalate, including the war in Yemen, these are lessons the United States must fully absorb.

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