



Every Mistake Causes Washington to Intervene in the Middle East Again

By Doug Bandow

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Washington again is at war in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the result likely will be the same as before. America will be intervening again in a few years to try to clean up the mess it is creating today.

The U.S. is not bombing the Islamic State out of necessity. Rather, Washington is acting in response to past mistakes. ISIL exists only because the Bush administration invaded Iraq.

The Obama administration's decision to attack the Islamic State makes no policy sense. ISIL employs a lot of bad people doing bad things. But so far they have focused on creating a quasi-government in the Middle East and have not targeted America.

Of course, the Islamic State killed a couple of U.S. citizens who fell into its hands, truly monstrous behavior. But these murders are no different than similar barbarities committed by various guerrillas, groups, gangs, pirates, and states around the globe. Such personal tragedies are no reason to go to war.

If successful in creating a viable "caliphate" ISIL's leaders might turn towards terrorism, but doing so would risk their quasi-state by bringing America's wrath down upon it. Moreover, Iraq demonstrated the foolishness of launching preventive wars based on fantasies disguised as forecasts. The U.S. is more likely to turn the Islamic State to terrorism now by making war on it, encouraging it to retaliate.

Perhaps the worst aspect of Washington's policy is absolving nearby states of their responsibility to destroy ISIL. The organization has threatened most every Middle Eastern nation.

Collectively they have more than a million men under arms. But these countries will not act if the U.S. bails them out.

More fundamental is the fact that American policymakers have so often gotten the Middle East wrong, intervening arrogantly and maladroitly, creating more problems than they solved. Already the attack on the Islamic State has caused al-Qaeda affiliates such as the al-Nusra Front to support ISIL. The U.S. is in the middle of a sectarian war in Iraq, with atrocities committed against Sunni civilians by Shia militias backing the Baghdad government.

Washington's limited bombing has made little progress in defeating the Islamic State. Aiding the "moderate" insurgents in Syria risks further undermining the Assad government, weakening the single force best positioned to block further ISIL gains.

But blowback is to be expected. In 1953 Washington helped oust Iran's democratically elected prime minister. Eventually the authoritarian Shah was overthrown, resulting in radical Islamist rule and a long, bitter struggle between the two nations.

The Reagan administration inserted the U.S. military into the middle of Lebanon's bloody civil war. Attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks followed.

Fear of Iranian domination of the Persian Gulf caused Washington to back Saddam Hussein in his aggressive war against Tehran. This support, along with later comments from the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, persuaded Hussein that the U.S. would not block his conquest of Kuwait.

The first Bush administration expelled Hussein's forces without overthrowing his regime. But the Bush and Clinton administrations launched regular air strikes, while U.S.-led sanctions harmed Iraqi civilians. U.N. Ambassador Madeleine Albright dismissed the report of the death of Iraqi children with the quip: "we think the price is worth it." American forces were left to garrison Saudi Arabia, providing one of Osama bin-Laden's grievances against America.

The second Bush administration invaded Iraq to install a friendly regime in Iraq. The immediate result was sectarian war, mass civilian casualties, destabilization of surrounding nations, and strengthened Iranian influence, along with high American human and financial costs. The Islamic State turned out to be a longer-term consequence.

The Obama administration joined with Europe to intervene in Libya's civil war, leaving the wreck of a nation which soon collapsed into violent chaos. The administration successively backed dictator Hosni Mubarak, his overthrow, and President Mohammed Morsi's election. Then the administration refused to call a coup a coup.

The U.S. blundered into the Syrian imbroglio, originally declaring President Bashar al-Assad to be a reformer, then insisting that Assad resign, discouraging any negotiated settlement. The administration ended up simultaneously criticizing the government, backing supposedly moderate insurgents, and bombing radical regime opponents.

Now Washington has reentered the Iraqi conflict. Experience suggests that U.S. authorities lack the knowledge, judgment, and competence to carry out almost any policy there without making the situation worse.

It is impossible to predict the exact outcome of Washington's newest military intervention in the Middle East. But experience suggests that new problems created will generate pressure for new interventions in coming years. Now more than ever Washington should implement the "humble" foreign policy originally advocated by George W. Bush.

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