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## Let Iraq fight its own civil war

Doug Bandow  
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President George W. Bush's foolish invasion of Iraq sowed the wind. Now Iraq, its neighbors, and America are reaping the whirlwind. Some Iraqi officials are calling for the return of U.S. combat troops. Washington should say no.

American conservatives traditionally reject domestic social engineering. But the neoconservative takeover of the Republican Party pushed the GOP into social engineering on a global scale. Just loose the military, argued conservative generalissimos, and all would be well.

Alas, it didn't work out that way in Iraq. The dictator, Saddam Hussein, was quickly dispatched, but nothing else went according to plan.

At the cost of several thousand dead the U.S. opened a geopolitical Pandora's box, unleashing a sectarian-guerrilla conflict which claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives. Bush's legacy was a corrupt, authoritarian, and sectarian state, friendly with Iran and Syria. Even worse was the emergence of the Islamic State, ripping Iraq apart, seizing large chunks of Syria, threatening Kurdistan, committing murder and mayhem, and threatening to destabilize Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

The Iraq disaster's architects, however, insisted that nothing had been their fault. Indeed, Iraq hawks claimed, the fault for Iraq's collapse was entirely President Barack Obama's, since he followed the Bush withdrawal schedule.

In fact, even had the administration succeeded in maintaining a garrison, little would have changed. Absent an American threat to launch a coup, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would have had no reason to abandon his sectarian course. Washington's only leverage would have been to threaten to withdraw its troops, which, of course, would have frustrated its objective of staying.

Worse would have been deploying American troops against the Maliki regime's domestic enemies. That would have made Washington an active combatant in sectarian conflict, tied America even closer to Maliki, and turned U.S. forces into a lightning rod for discontented Iraqis.

How should Washington respond today? Experience suggests that renewed American intervention is no less likely to again stir the whirlwind. Bombing jihadist radicals, supporting

authoritarian regimes, taking sides in sectarian conflict, playing multiple sides in Syria, hectoring allied states, and pursuing new but still unattainable objectives in the Middle East offer a multitude of opportunities for bloody blowback.

In fact, the Islamic State became a significant U.S. interest only because Washington termed it one. Contra the Obama administration, ISIL's fighters are insurgents, not terrorists. The Islamic State stands apart from al-Qaida because the former is seeking to become an organized government rather than a terrorist group. Acting like the latter, especially against America, would risk forfeiting the former.

Of course, the Islamic State's objectives could change. But butchering two Americans who fell into its hands illustrated the group's monstrous philosophy, not its threat potential.

Washington has stepped up its commitment to overthrow Syria's Assad regime. President Bashar al-Assad is an ugly character, but his army is the best force currently opposing ISIL. Aiding the so-called "moderate" insurgents in Syria could tie down government forces, enabling the Islamic State to win. If ISIL's black flag eventually flies over Damascus, the president would be pressed to commit combat forces.

The only serious alternative to fully re-entering the war is to step back, making clear that the Islamic State's neighbors will bear the cost of any further advances. Iraq desperately requires a political solution separating anti-Baghdad Sunni tribes and former Baathists from their unlikely ally of convenience, ISIL.

Jordan and the Gulf States also have much at stake and military forces available for use. Most important is Turkey, which alone has some 400,000 men under arms. Washington should inform Ankara that there will be no NATO involvement in a problem Turkey should confront.

The administration's Iraq policy has failed. The U.S. is more entangled in war; Americans have been killed in retaliation for Washington's intervention; the Islamic State is still advancing.

U.S. officials should back out of Iraq, not jump in. This may be Obama's final opportunity to avoid a lengthy conflict which could come to define his legacy as the 2003 Iraq War came to define that of George W. Bush.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan.*