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Instead of Meddling Endlessly in the Mideast, Washington Should Stop Trying to Fix Iraq and Everywhere Else

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KILIS, TURKEY--Syria's civil war has washed over Turkey's border, flooding the latter with hundreds of thousands of refugees. The problems worsen daily, as the Obama administration contemplates expanded aid to the rebels. The Turkish government is urging Washington to intervene more actively to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Syrian refugees also look to America for help. Yet administration efforts so far have yielded few positive results.

Jordan and Lebanon also are being overwhelmed by the spillover of the Syrian civil war. George W. Bush's grandest foreign policy "success," the ouster of Saddam Hussein, is turning into an even more dramatic debacle. Egypt is racing back into Mubarak-style authoritarianism, with political instability likely to eventually follow.

Turkey is moving in both an authoritarian and Islamic direction, raising doubts about its future international orientation. The outcome of President Barack Obama's "splendid little war" in Libya continues to unravel.

The unrepresentative and exploitative Gulf kingdoms face an uncertain future. Ruthless repression cannot insulate the kleptocratic Saudi monarchy from internal fractures and external pressures. With the always dim prospect for peace disappearing, Israel, Washington's staunchest Middle Eastern ally, faces an increasing challenge in remaining both democratic and Jewish.

The region is aflame and U.S. policy bears much of the blame. Washington's relentless attempt to reorder and reshape complex peoples, distant places, and volatile disputes has backfired spectacularly. America has caused manifold problems while proving unable to solve any of them.

The blame is not limited to Barack Obama. However ineffective his policies--and there isn't much good to say about them--they largely follow those of his predecessors.

Moreover, his most vociferous critics were most wrong in the past. Particularly the neocons, who crafted the Iraq disaster.

Their claim that keeping U.S. troops in Iraq would have prevented that nation's current implosion ignores both history and experience. The bitter divisions among Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds reflect the country's artificial creation; the U.S. invasion wrecked the national state, setting the stage for a bitter sectarian struggle. Those who warned the Bush administration that it was planting the seeds of future conflict were dismissed by officials convinced that wishing a policy result was sufficient to make it so.

Rather than acknowledge their own responsibility for that nation's implosion, the neocons prefer to blame President Obama, who merely followed the withdrawal schedule established by President George W. Bush. The latter failed to win Baghdad's agreement for a continuing U.S. force presence before leaving office. Exactly how President Obama could have forced sovereign Iraq to accept a permanent U.S. garrison never has been explained.

Even less clear is how American troops could have created a liberal, democratic, and stable Iraq. Had Washington unexpectedly won permission to forever defend Iran, keeping U.S. forces on station would not have turned Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki into a paragon of democratic virtue, practicing inclusive politics and decentralizing authority. Any attempt to impose U.S. wishes would have failed as the Maliki government put its own interests first. Absent a willingness to withdraw America's troops--which would defeat Washington's purpose--the U.S. would have had little leverage. Even then Prime Minister Maliki likely would have bid them a fond farewell rather than yield power.

Using American forces to fight the Maliki regime's battles would have been even worse. Saddam Hussein, the justification for intervening in that nation, is long dead. If Baghdad cannot defend itself more than a decade after the U.S. invasion, that is Baghdad's, not Washington's, responsibility.

Moreover, intervening in Iraq's putative civil war today would be a cure worse than the disease. Air strikes no less than ground forces would simultaneously entangle the U.S. and increase its stakes in another likely lengthy conflict. Washington might prevent one or another group from taking power in Baghdad or elsewhere, but already has demonstrated its inability to determine Iraq's future direction. Moreover, fighting and killing more foreigners in another people's conflict would make more enemies of America, threatening more terrorist blowback.

In Iraq the Sunni radicals are unlikely to conquer the Shia-majority country. Their success already has mobilized Shiites, and predominantly Shia Iran will ensure Baghdad's control over at least majority Shiite areas. Tehran's involvement may not be Washington's preferred option, but another U.S. occupation would be far worse. Ultimately de facto partition may be the most practical solution.

Further American intervention in Syria would be no less foolish. The "usual suspects" have spent the last three years demanding U.S. military action. Yet America has no reason to fight over who rules Damascus. Bashar al-Assad is no friend of Washington, but he had no interest in conflict with America, kept the peace with Israel, and provided refuge to Iraqis fleeing sectarian violence triggered by the U.S. invasion.

The civil war is destabilizing the region, but American involvement would not impose order. Boots on the ground is inconceivable. More tepid action--no fly zones and increased arms shipments--would be more likely to prolong the conflict than deliver a decisive result. Moreover, Assad's ouster likely would trigger a second round of killing directed against regime supporters, such as Alawites and other religious minorities. With multiple parties engaged in the killing, there is no humanitarian option.

Nor does anyone know who would end up controlling what. The assumption that Washington could get just the right arms to just the right opposition forces to ensure emergence of just the right liberal, democratic, pro-Western government of a united Syria is charmingly naive. The U.S. long ago demonstrated that it was better at destroying than building nations.

Administration blundering in Egypt is equally dramatic though so far less costly. For decades successive U.S. administrations supported a succession of corrupt military dictatorships. Washington convinced itself that it had to underwrite authoritarian misrule to preserve Cairo's peace with Israel, even though Egypt's military had the most to lose from another war. As Mubarak's support crumbled the Obama administration embraced him, then urged a negotiated transition, shifted its support to newly elected Mohamed Morsi, and finally offered tepid support for the military coup. Today America is despised by all sides, a notable achievement. Especially since Washington never had the influence it or others imagined.

If there is a bright spot for the administration, it unexpectedly is Iran, where a negotiated nuclear settlement remains possible. However, the underlying problem is almost entirely of America's creation. In 1953 at British instigation the U.S. overthrew the democratically elected prime minister, transferring power to the Shah. He consolidated power, brutalized his people, forcibly modernized Iran's traditional society, and began a nuclear program.

Naturally, Washington embraced him as a close friend and ally.

In 1978 the angry Iranian people overthrew him. Radical Islamists pushed aside democratic moderates, turning Tehran into America's number one enemy overnight. Fear of Iranian domination of the Gulf led Washington to back Iraq's Hussein in his bloody aggressive war against Iran. That support helped convince Baghdad that it could get away with grabbing Kuwait, long viewed by most Iraqis as historically part of their nation. Ironically, in this way Iraq essentially did what Washington feared Iran would do.

In response the U.S. attacked Iraq and deployed troops to Saudi Arabia, which became one of Osama bin Laden's chief grievances. After the war's end the U.S. remained entangled in the region with economic sanctions and no fly zones. Then President Bush invaded Iraq to "drain the swamp," unleashing sectarian conflict in that country, diluting U.S. military strength worldwide, soiling America's international reputation, and empowering Islamist Iran--even then feared to be developing nuclear weapons. Now the Iraqi government installed by Washington totters, so Tehran is sending a rescue mission.

American intervention has broken pottery all over the Middle East. Every time the U.S. attempts to repair its last accident, it increases and spreads the mess. It is time for a different approach. One in which Washington does not attempt to micromanage the affairs of other nations. In which Washington practices humility.

This would not be isolationism. America, and especially Americans, should be engaged in the world. Economic and cultural ties benefit all. Political cooperation can help meet global problems. Humanitarian needs are varied and manifold. Military action sometimes is necessary, but only rarely--certainly far less often than presumed by Washington.

The U.S. government's expectations should be realistic and ambitions should be bounded. American officials should abandon their persistent fantasy of reordering the world. Washington's consistently botched policies in the Middle East demonstrate the difficulty, indeed, impossibility of social engineering abroad. It is not just that Washington fails to achieve its objectives. More often U.S. intervention is counterproductive.

What if the Obama administration jumps back into Iraq militarily? What if the U.S. gets more deeply involved in Syria? What if Washington attempts to oust another government, remake another society, or transform another country? Experience suggests the results will not be pretty.

President Obama's foreign policy may be feckless. But that's not its principal failing. The administration remains a captive of its predecessors' interventionist follies. As long as Washington, irrespective of party control, attempts to dominate and micromanage the world, Washington will end up harming American interests.

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