



America Should Stop Trying To Fix Other Countries

By: Doug Badow
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Syria's civil war has now washed over this country's border, flooding it with hundreds of thousands of refugees. Washington's efforts to solve the crisis so far have yielded few positive results.

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. The outcome of President Obama's "splendid little war" in Libya continues to unravel.

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.

The blame isn't only Obama's. However ineffective his policies, they largely follow those of his predecessors. Moreover, his most vocal 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 stopped its implosion ignores both history and experience.

Rather than acknowledge their own responsibility for Iraq's implosion, the neocons prefer to blame Obama, who merely followed the withdrawal schedule established by Bush. He failed to win Baghdad's agreement for a continuing U.S. presence before leaving office.

Exactly how Obama could have forced Iraq to accept a permanent U.S. garrison never has been explained.

Less clear is how U.S. troops could have built a democratic, stable Iraq. Attempts to impose U.S. wishes would have failed as the Maliki government put its own interests first. Using our forces to fight Baghdad's battles would have been far worse.

Intervening 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. Moreover, 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. Ultimately de facto partition may be the most practical solution.

Further American intervention in Syria would be no less foolish. America has no reason to fight over who rules Damascus.

The civil war is destabilizing the region, but U.S. involvement would not impose order. Boots on the ground is inconceivable. 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.

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 the U.S. overthrew the democratically elected prime minister, transferring power to the Shah. He consolidated power and brutalized his people.

In 1978 the angry Iranians overthrew him. Radical Islamists pushed aside democratic moderates, turning Tehran into America's No. 1 enemy overnight. Fear of Iranian domination of the Gulf led Washington to back Iraq's bloody aggressive war against Iran.

After an emboldened Iraq sought to swallow Kuwait, the U.S. attacked the former and deployed troops to Saudi Arabia, which became one of Osama bin Laden's chief grievances.

Bush invaded Iraq to "drain the swamp," unleashing sectarian conflict there and empowering Islamist Iran — even then feared to be developing nuclear weapons. Now Tehran is sending a rescue mission to save the Iraqi government installed by Washington.

It is time for Washington to stop trying to micromanage other nations' affairs and to practice humility. This wouldn't be isolationism. America, and especially Americans, should be engaged in the world. But our government's expectations should be realistic, its ambitions bounded. American officials should abandon their persistent fantasy of reordering the world.

Obama's foreign policy may be feckless. But that's not its principal failing. As long as Washington tries to dominate and micromanage the world, it will end up harming U.S. interests.

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