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Stay out of the Mideast

By Doug Bandow

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The uber-hawks and neocons who led America into the disastrous invasion of Iraq are campaigning for a repeat. If only the U.S. will go to war along the Euphrates a second time, they promise, everything will turn out well.

Americans should ignore these sirens of death. Attempting to forcibly transform Iraq never was Washington's responsibility. Having botched the job once, U.S. policymakers should not try again.

There was much to despise about Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but he helped constrain Iran and enforced an ugly stability at home, suppressing sectarian violence and al-Qaida. As many analysts, including yours truly, warned, his forced departure would be welcome in principle but bloody in practice.

Americans found little gratitude in Baghdad for their sacrifice. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ruled with a harsh hand, favored his Shia supporters and rejected a U.S. military garrison.

Nor would an American presence have saved Iraq from internal collapse. U.S. troops could not have forced positive political change. Washington's only leverage would come from threatening to withdraw its forces – which Maliki almost certainly would have accepted before relaxing control. Employing U.S. troops against Baghdad's opponents, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, would have been far worse.

Washington nevertheless helped arm the Iraqi military, but a secret program begun last year to aid Baghdad against Sunni militants foundered. The Maliki government failed to maintain an effective force. As a result, Iraqi military units melted away in the face of ISIS attacks.

Yet the situation is not nearly as threatening for Washington as for Baghdad. So far ISIS has acted as an insurgency in both Syria and Iraq, not a terrorist group targeting America. In fact, the organization's break with al-Qaida reflected the latter's focus on the "far enemy," that is, the U.S.

In contrast, ISIS is seeking to establish a real state and may not want to risk its practical gains in a war against the U.S. Obviously this could change, but Washington should not encourage retaliation against Americans by needlessly striking the group. Moreover, Iraq will not fall under ISIS control. The radicals lack the resources necessary to conquer Iraq or even take Baghdad.

Their Sunni allies want regional autonomy or fairer distribution of the national spoils, not a radical Islamic state.

Moreover, by making the conflict into a religious war ISIS has galvanized Iraq's Shia majority. A bitter and potentially long struggle between essentially lawless paramilitaries impends. Into this violent and unpredictable imbroglio President Obama is sending "up to 300" Special Forces. Even worse, he maintains the possibility of "targeted, precise military action," presumably meaning air and drone strikes.

However, Maliki's Shia-dominated government has the required numbers and resources. But Baghdad's military lacks leadership and commitment while the Iraqi state lacks credibility and will.

The administration unsuccessfully has pushed Maliki to be more inclusive. Washington now is not so subtly attempting to oust Maliki from power. This is a dubious venture. Maliki has pointedly rejected demands for his scalp, even as a condition of aid. Many Shiites have rallied around Maliki and Iran continues to back him. Even successfully defenestrating him might bring little improvement – some possible successors are untested or even less credible than Maliki.

Military action is even more problematic. Airpower offers no simple solution. The allies employed some 25,000 strikes on behalf of the Libyan opposition, which still took several months to triumph in a desert-oriented campaign.

Air strikes have limited effectiveness in urban warfare and cannot liberate captured cities. To minimize "collateral damage" airpower best relies on ground support for targeting, something that could not be left to sectarian Iraqi forces.

Unfortunately, another war on Muslims would make even more enemies of America. Indeed, targeting Sunni areas would mean killing people, including noncombatants, who once allied with Washington against al-Qaida. De facto partition, perhaps with autonomous Shia, Sunni and Kurdish zones within a highly federalized state, might offer the best possibility of peaceful coexistence.

The Middle East appears to be a tragedy permanently set on repeat. That is a reason for America to stay out, not jump in.

A decade ago America foolishly blew up one of the most important countries in the Middle East. Obviously the U.S. did not leave behind "a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq," as Obama claimed in 2011. America cannot put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Washington should learn a little humility and leave the clean-up to others.

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