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America: Thug for Hire

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The United States once aspired to be a shining city upon a hill, an example to the world. What an example it has become. Today Washington is the place for other governments to go when they want a competitor roughed up. No one wants to do the dirty work themselves. Instead, they ask the United States to bomb, invade and/or occupy their adversary. At least, that's what the WikiLeaks cables suggest. Foreign governments routinely and shamelessly urge America to go to war for their benefit. Other nations long have urged the United States to defend them. In World War I the entente powers—including despotic Czarist Russia and colonial governments which collectively subjugated hundreds of millions of people—pressed Woodrow Wilson to go to war for “democracy.” Alas, America's maladroit intervention resulted in everything but democracy.

In World War II France and especially Great Britain pressed for America's entry on their behalf. Here, at least, there was a truly evil and threatening enemy. South Korea wanted and received U.S. aid when attacked. The Hungarian revolutionaries hoped for the same and were

disappointed. South Vietnamese, Kuwaitis, Bosnian Muslims, Somali warlords and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo later won Washington's military support; ethnic Karen guerrillas in Burma and the Georgian government did not.

Some of these cases are complex. For instance, evidence indicates that Tbilisi started the conflict with Russia. Nevertheless, it's natural for endangered countries or peoples to call on another nation to aid their defense. Most of the time doing so isn't in America's interest. But the request is understandable.

However, WikiLeaks suggests that foreign governments have moved a step beyond. Even when there is no pressing, let alone imminent, threat, they now ask Washington to loose the dogs of war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has openly urged the U.S. government to take military action against Iran. The WikiLeaks cables included warnings from Israeli officials that Tehran was hardening its nuclear sites, as well as a claim from Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak that action was needed now, since in a matter of at most eighteen months "any military solution would result in unacceptable collateral damage."

Yet Tehran currently possesses nothing and will not soon possess anything. While there's good reason to be suspicious of Iran's activities, evidence of a serious and successful nuclear weapons program remains illusive. Moreover, Israel is the dominant regional military power and possesses one hundred fifty or more nuclear weapons. Presumably Israel developed nuclear weapons for just this contingency, to deter attack by a neighbor. There is no evidence that the Iranian leadership is suicidal; indeed, Israeli security analysts with whom I have spoken believe Tehran desires the bomb for deterrence and status, not aggression and self-immolation.

Yet Israel wants the United States to set fire to the Middle East, initiating the third war in less than a decade. From Israel's perspective, Washington is not a friend or even ally, but just convenient muscle on call. Several Arab nations obviously look at America the same way. That's not really surprising, but the dismissive assumption that Washington's job is to eliminate a regional rival remains disturbing.

There's Saudi Arabia, well-armed by the United States and in line for a new \$60 billion arms package. Apparently the new F-15 fighters, upgrades for older F-15s, Blackhawk, Apache, and Little Bird helicopters, anti-air and anti-ship missiles, and guided bombs aren't enough for a kleptocratic monarchy which lacks popular legitimacy.

Under sanctions and suffering from a divided political leadership and popular opposition at home, Tehran is not well positioned to threaten Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states. Yet U.S. diplomatic cables indicate that Saudi King Abdullah "frequently exhorted the United States to attack Iran to put an end to its nuclear weapons program." The Saudi ambassador to America, Adel al-Jubeir, "recalled the king's frequent exhortations to the United States to attack Iran" and the king's admonition for Americans "to cut off the head of the snake." Although not necessary for Riyadh's defense, wrecking Iranian society would turn the Saud dynasty into the dominant Muslim power in the Persian Gulf.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain took a similar stance, telling an American diplomat "to terminate their nuclear program, by whatever means necessary. That program must be stopped." Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed, urged an early attack on Iran: "They have to be dealt with before they do something tragic." In 2003 he advocated that action against Tehran "be taken this year or next year."

Zeid Rifai, head of the Jordanian Senate, said simply: “Bomb Iran, or live with an Iranian bomb.” Officials in other nations, such as Egypt and Qatar denounced Iran as evil and a threat.

There’s good reason to work against an Iranian nuclear weapon, but the cost of war for America would be very high, especially with so many troops still deployed in Iraq. But other than Israel none of these “allies” is willing to publicly back Washington in war. And all would expect America to protect them from Iranian retaliation.

Iran is the most common target of other nations hoping Washington will eliminate a potentially threatening rival. But it is not the only one. China’s increasingly aggressive conduct has caused unease throughout East Asia. It’s obvious that Washington’s allies, both formal (Japan, South Korea and Australia) and informal (Taiwan) expect American protection in the event of attack. But Canberra recently went further in pressing the United States to act against Beijing.

While advocating engagement with China, then–Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd urged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to prepare “to deploy force if everything goes wrong.” Exactly what he intended isn’t clear. Perhaps he only meant if Beijing assaults an American ally. But the U.S. government considered preventive war against the mainland in the mid-1960s. Moreover, Rudd’s comment could involve something more like the blank check which many Taiwanese believe they enjoy. Engage in provocative behavior, but don’t worry about the outcome, since Washington will be there if things go badly.

War is sometimes a tragic necessity, but not nearly as often as Washington attacks or threatens other nations. There’s a reason other governments have come to regard America as a high-class street thug, available to take out bothersome neighbors.

It is bad enough when the U.S. government gets involved to help other countries defend themselves when doing so is contrary to America’s security interest. It is far worse to go to war at another country’s behest when the latter faces no imminent threat. Washington policymakers should learn to resist the Sirens’ call to war, no matter how often or insistently it is repeated.

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