



Why America Must Choose Its Partners Wisely

By: Jennifer Keister

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President Obama has called for increased U.S. assistance to the Iraqi government to deal with escalating instability and a violent Sunni insurgency. But Iraq's resurgent violence and vulnerability to the threat of radical rebels cannot be divorced from the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The current debate about the extent, form, and limits of U.S. military aid highlights the challenges of even limited foreign internal defense (FID) assistance to help other states tackle their security problems.

Iraq is emblematic of a larger challenge. At several points, President Obama's West Point address last month emphasized the role of "partner countries" that could leverage U.S. assistance to counter security threats within their own borders and regions. But the president's speech and subsequent debate about it have largely failed to provide criteria for selecting these partners.

Iraq's headlines join others over the past year: the Boko Haram kidnappings in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab's siege of Westgate Mall in Kenya, unrest in northern Mali, continuing instability in Libya, the list goes on. All of these cases have produced calls for U.S. assistance or intervention, or highlighted the role of existing or past American aid and debated increasing such aid. Iraq is somewhat unique in the wealth of information the American public and policy makers have about it, but these other cases share some of the risks identified in Iraq.

"Helping others defend themselves" sounds more attractive than "defending third parties from one another," particularly while facing a fiscal and domestic political reality that limits the prospect for direct intervention. However, how do we tell the difference between states we can "partner" into effective and self-sufficient stability, versus those that risk pulling the United States into local quagmires or exacerbating security problems?

For partnerships to be effective, they generally require effective partners. To be sure, U.S. engagement may aim to improve these states' capabilities, but a policy based on partnerships still needs a litmus test to sort out good partners from potential risks. Choosing good partners requires information. While some states refuse U.S. assistance, others pursue American aid and then seek to use it for unrelated purposes.

The current Iraq debate highlights Maliki's sectarian policies as contributing to ISIS's success, and questions whether aid might inadvertently facilitate such policies. Assistance to other possible partners requires similar information about the political, social, and economic dynamics that create and sustain violent groups.

Most violent groups that policy makers identify as security threats attract U.S. attention by rebelling or attacking the states in which they live or operate. These groups are generally disgruntled for a reason. Criticism of Maliki's sectarian policies highlight this issue in Iraq, but questionable governance, corruption and military abuse in Nigeria have spurred Boko Haram, and Mali's Tuaregs have complained for decades of underrepresentation.

A decade of direct U.S. intervention failed to solve Iraq's sectarian problems, but less-than-direct forms of intervention face the same difficulties. U.S. assistance can come with pressure to professionalize militaries and make governments less corrupt and more representative. But both direct and indirect intervention may exacerbate tensions. Backing Maliki's government puts the United States in a position of supporting a sectarian regime. Answering the justifiable outcry against Boko Haram's kidnappings and other atrocities puts the United States in a position of aiding Nigeria's brutal military.

In some cases, external support can also forestall political adaptation by protecting regimes from the violent, unpleasant and destabilizing consequences of their own political choices. Historically, many regimes have only opted to share power when convinced (sometimes through violence) that excluding rivals makes them more of a threat than including them. After much violence, Sudan and South Sudan finally parted ways in 2011—though conflict recently returned within South Sudan. Since its 2011 revolution, Tunisian tumult seems to have settled into a power-sharing deal.

Similarly, rampant corruption and dictators' efforts to "coup-proof" their regimes can enervate military capabilities. However, even paranoid dictators can replace patriarchy with meritocracy in government institutions when threat focuses the need for competence.

However, if assistance limits the existential consequences of poor governance, and political inclusiveness or other reforms are not conditions of U.S. aid, partner states will have little incentive to change. Small footprint aid may have even more limited leverage—further suggesting that partnerships should be carefully chosen.

We are asking the right questions about Iraq. We are asking them in part because we have a lot of information about (and plenty of reason to be wary of) involvement in Iraq's internal dynamics. But we should ask these questions about other potential partners too—applying these lessons may help us avoid repeating past mistakes.

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