

# GANNETT

## **New war can't fix what's ailing Iraq**

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The grisly beheadings of our two countrymen, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, got Americans' blood up, and we want to punish their murderers. This can and should be done without another Iraq war.

It's grotesque that the foreign policy elite has seized on the outrage at the deaths of Foley and Sotloff to sell the public on another U.S. war whose success turns on remaking the region's politics.

If we should have learned anything from the Iraq war — and President Barack Obama's administration's failed policies in Afghanistan and Libya — it's that we can't fix other countries' political pathologies at an acceptable cost.

And make no mistake: The administration's strategy can't work unless politics in Iraq and Syria change.

Progress in Iraq used to hinge on Nouri al-Maliki changing Iraq's politics. When he failed, we helped get rid of him and bring in Haider al-Abadi. Perhaps al-Abadi will have the extraordinary political skills that his several predecessors since our invasion in 2003 lacked. Perhaps Iraq's politics are finally turning toward liberalism and unity. Perhaps.

The Syria policy seems equally dim. Obama says U.S. policy is to destroy ISIS, but in doing so, we don't want to help the Assad regime, whose rule in Syria it challenges. So Obama says he'll do more to help moderate rebels. For their part, the Sotloff family says their son was sold to ISIS by a "moderate" group much like the ones the administration aims to help.

ISIS is a symptom of a number of problems: the regional conflict between the Gulf Arabs and Iran; the civil war in Syria; and Iraqi political disputes set loose by the 2003 regime change.

If a new U.S. war doesn't cure those diseases, they will remain to cause similar symptoms in the future. As Chas Freeman, the former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, put it, "The contradictions and incoherence of our strategy really beggar the imagination."

Our aim in response to the Foley and Sotloff killings should be simple: punishment. Several years on, when we look back on our latest Wilsonian experiment in the Middle East, perhaps even Obama will see its folly.

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