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America can't be world's policeman any longer

By Doug Bandow
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Syria's civil war has washed over Turkey's border, flooding the latter 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 Barack 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 spectacularly.

The blame is not limited to Barack Obama. However ineffective his policies, they largely follow those of his predecessors. Moreover, his most vociferous 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 prevented that nation's current implosion ignores both history and experience.

Rather than acknowledge their own responsibility for that nation's implosion, the neocons prefer to blame President Obama, who merely followed the withdrawal schedule established by President George W. Bush. The latter failed to win Baghdad's agreement for a continuing U.S. force presence before leaving office. Exactly how President Obama could have forced sovereign Iraq to accept a permanent U.S. garrison never has been explained.

Even less clear is how American troops could have created a liberal, democratic, and stable Iraq. Any attempt to impose U.S. wishes would have failed as the Maliki government put its own interests first. Using American forces to fight Baghdad's battles would have been even 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 American 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 Iranian people overthrew him. Radical Islamists pushed aside democratic moderates, turning Tehran into America's number one enemy overnight. Fear of Iranian domination of the Gulf led Washington to back Iraq's Hussein in his 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. President Bush invaded Iraq to "drain the swamp," unleashing sectarian conflict in that country 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.

American intervention has broken pottery all over the Middle East. It is time for Washington to stop trying to micromanage the affairs of other nations. And for Washington to practice humility.

This would not be isolationism. America, and especially Americans, should be engaged in the world.

However, the U.S. government's expectations should be realistic and ambitions should be bounded. American officials should abandon their persistent fantasy of reordering the world.

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

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