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Republicans Take Senate, Likely To Push For More War -- War That Will Never End

By Doug Bandow
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Washington is at war in the Middle East. So what is new? Unfortunately, pressure for military intervention will grow with Republican control of the Senate. That body's most war-happy members, such as John McCain, will enjoy increased influence.

The result of any new conflicts likely will be similar as before. America will be intervening again in a few years to try to clean up the mess it is creating today. And then going to war a few years after that for the same reason.

The U.S. is not bombing the Islamic State out of necessity. Rather, Washington is acting in response to past mistakes. ISIL exists only because the Bush administration invaded Iraq in 2003. That action grew out of George H.W. Bush's first war against Baghdad. Which was tied to American support for Saddam Hussein against Iran the previous decade. Which grew out of the Iranian revolution, whose victors targeted Washington because of its backing for the ousted Shah of Iran.

Thus, Americans are paying the price for decisions to meddle in the Middle East made decades ago. Yet a Greek Chorus of those most responsible for today's failed policies loudly demands that the U.S. again intervene.

The Obama administration's decision to attack the Islamic State makes no policy sense. ISIL employs a lot of bad people doing bad things. But so far they have focused on creating a quasi-government in the Middle East and have not targeted America.

Of course, the Islamic State tortured and killed a couple of U.S. citizens who fell into its hands, truly monstrous behavior. But these murders are no different than similar barbarities committed by various guerrillas, groups, gangs, pirates, and states around the globe. Some U.S. allies do much the same; for instance, Saudi Arabia beheads nonviolent offenders. Such personal tragedies are no reason to go to war.

If successful in creating a viable "caliphate" ISIL's leaders might turn towards terrorism, but doing so would risk their quasi-state by bringing America's wrath down upon it. Moreover, Iraq demonstrated the foolishness of launching preventive wars based on forecasts that turn out to be

fantasies. The U.S. is more likely to turn the Islamic State to terrorism now by making war on it, encouraging it to retaliate.

Perhaps the worst aspect of Washington's policy is absolving nearby states of their responsibility to destroy ISIL. The organization has asserted territorial designs against or launched ideological attacks on almost every Middle Eastern nation. Collectively the latter have more than a million men under arms. Iraq's Shia-dominated national government must conciliate the country's Sunni minority. Turkey must reach a modus vivendi with Kurdish forces against their common foe. Sunni Gulf monarchies must firmly challenge Sunni radicals. All these states must accommodate Iranian aid for Baghdad. None of these steps will be easy, and they will be taken only if the U.S. demonstrates that it will not bail out those with the most at stake in preventing the Islamic State from becoming an actual Islamic state.

Yet the fact that bombing ISIL is bad policy is not the most important reason to oppose doing so. More fundamental is the fact that American policymakers have so often gotten the Middle East wrong, intervening arrogantly and maladroitly, creating more problems than they solved. The latter often turned into perceived crises, spurring new rounds of intervention, repeating the process. Again and again.

Already the attack on the Islamic State has caused al-Qaeda affiliates such as the al-Nusra Front to support ISIL. The U.S. is in the middle of a sectarian war in Iraq, with atrocities committed against Sunni civilians by Shia militias backing the Baghdad government. The administration is excusing human rights abuses to win Cairo's support for the coalition.

While America's limited bombing appears to have boosted specific defensive efforts—in particular, for the Kurdish cities of Irbil and Kobani—Washington has made little progress in defeating the Islamic State. Aiding the “moderate” insurgents in Syria risks further undermining the Assad government, weakening the single force best positioned to block further ISIL gains. More blowback seems inevitable.

But this is to be expected. In 1953 Washington friended the British by helping to overthrow Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. The Shah made his country a U.S. ally—at a high price, alas, suppressing democracy, forcibly modernizing his people, and starting a nuclear program. In 1979 he was overthrown by a liberal-Islamist coalition which led to radical Islamist rule. The takeover of the American embassy was but the opening battle in a long, bitter struggle between the two nations.

To buttress the national government (in name only) of Lebanon in the midst of a bitter civil war, the Reagan administration inserted the U.S. military into the middle of a conflict with 25 armed factions. Washington actively backed the nominally “Christian” government in Beirut, bombarding Muslim and Druze positions. Which triggered attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks; the administration withdrew American forces, leading to claims of U.S. weakness.

Fear of Iranian domination of the Persian Gulf caused Washington to back Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980s in his aggressive war against Tehran. The Reagan administration provided

Iraq with intelligence, reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers to protect the source of war loans for Hussein's government, and sent Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad as a special envoy. This support, along with later comments from the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, persuaded Hussein that the U.S. would not block his conquest of Kuwait, viewed by many Iraqis as an artifact of British line-drawing.

The first Bush administration went to war to expel Hussein's forces without overthrowing his regime. But the Bush and Clinton administrations intervened on a regular basis with air strikes to protect Kurdish autonomy and otherwise restrict Iraqi activities, while U.S.-led sanctions harmed Iraqi civilians. U.N. Ambassador Madeleine Albright dismissed the report of the death of Iraqi children with the quip: "we think the price is worth it." American forces were left to garrison Saudi Arabia, despite the lack of any evidence that Baghdad harbored aggressive intentions, providing one of Osama bin-Laden's grievances against America.

The second Bush administration pressed for democracy, except in countries such as Egypt, where American autocrats were friendly. The administration urged elections in the occupied Palestinian territories, leading to the victory of Hamas—which Washington refused to recognize, resulting in well-earned criticism of hypocrisy. The invasion of Iraq was supposed to "drain the swamp" and install a friendly regime in Iraq. Instead, the immediate result was sectarian war, mass civilian casualties, destabilization of surrounding nations, and strengthened Iranian influence, along with high American human and financial costs. The Islamic State turned out to be a longer-term consequence, encouraged by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's highly sectarian rule.

The Obama administration did little better. It continued frenetic efforts to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians but U.S. relations with both sides deteriorated. Washington joined with Europe to intervene in the civil war in Libya, increasing casualties by extending the conflict and leaving the wreck of a nation which soon collapsed into violent chaos. The administration rhetorically celebrated democracy, while acquiescing to Bahrain's Sunni monarchy suppressing its Shia majority. In Egypt Washington successively backed dictator Hosni Mubarak, his overthrow, and President Mohammed Morsi's election. Then the administration refused to call the military coup a coup, and praised the repressive al-Sisi regime for its supposed restoration of democracy.

The U.S. blundered into the Syrian imbroglio, originally declaring President Bashar al-Assad to be a reformer, then insisting that Assad resign, discouraging any negotiated political settlement. The administration ended up simultaneously criticizing the government, backing supposedly moderate insurgents, and bombing radical regime opponents. Few believe that Washington's minimal support for the weakest faction will enable the latter to defeat both government and radicals.

What are America's Middle East successes? Well, Jordan has not yet collapsed, the venal Saudi royals so far have successfully maintained control, the smaller Gulf States continue to navigate rough geopolitical seas.

Now Washington has reentered the Iraqi conflict, disingenuously called a “counterterrorism” operation by Secretary of State John Kerry, despite the lack of any evidence of ISIL’s ability or desire to strike America. Experience suggests that even if the war—certainly perceived as war by those being bombed by U.S. planes and drones—made policy sense, there is no reason to believe that U.S. authorities have the knowledge, judgment, or competence to carry out such a policy successfully without making the situation worse.

Today’s hyper-interventionists insist that Washington always must act, whether the issue is a coup d’etat in a small, obscure country or attempt at global conquest by a hostile, totalitarian power. To suggest that not every problem threatens America or requires U.S. intervention generates a reflexive charge of “isolationism.”

Yet bombing, invading, and occupying other nations are curious forms of “internationalism” which almost always create greater problems than they solve. Indeed, the best argument against intervention may be the fact that today’s officials fail the policy equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath: First do no harm. Good intentions are not enough. Washington long ago demonstrated a disastrous inability to bring good intentions to fruition.

It is impossible to predict the exact outcome of Washington’s newest military intervention in the Middle East, let alone any new conflicts advanced by the Senate’s loudest warmongers. But experience suggests that the U.S. will fail to achieve its objectives. And new problems created will generate pressure for new interventions in coming years. Now more than ever Washington should implement the “humble” foreign policy originally advocated by George W. Bush.

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