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U.S. Now Reaping The Iraqi Whirlwind: Washington Should Back Out Of Iraq's New Civil War

By Doug Bandow
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George W. Bush's foolish invasion of Iraq sowed the wind. Now Iraq, its neighbors, and America are reaping the whirlwind. Some Iraqi officials are calling for the return of U.S. combat troops. Washington should respond with a clear and unequivocal no.

American conservatives traditionally rejected domestic social engineering. Despite its best efforts, government cannot easily remake society and reform humanity—at least for the better. Attempts to do so usually end up going spectacularly wrong, proving to be both destructive and expensive.

But the neoconservative takeover of the Republican Party's foreign policy pushed the GOP into social engineering on a global scale. Just loose the military, argued the conservative Generalissimos, and all would be well. Peace and democracy would triumph, evil would disappear, the lion would lie down with the lamb, and former opponents would hold hands and sing Kumbaya.

Alas, it didn't work out that way in Iraq. The dictator, Saddam Hussein, was quickly dispatched, but nothing else went according to plan. At the cost of several thousand dead the U.S. opened a geopolitical Pandora's Box, unleashing a sectarian-guerrilla conflict which claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives and destroyed minority religious communities. Bush's legacy was a corrupt, authoritarian, and sectarian state, friendly with Iran and Syria, Washington's prime adversaries in the Middle East.

Even worse was the emergence of the Islamic State, ripping Iraq apart, seizing large chunks of Syria, threatening Kurdistan, committing murder and mayhem, and threatening to destabilize Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Few imagined that the unintended consequences of Bush's grand crusade could be so bad.

Most Americans came to recognize that the Iraq invasion had been a debacle, a dramatic demonstration of hubris and incompetence. The disaster's architects, however, doubled down. Nothing had been their fault, the neocons insisted. If only President Bush had used more troops. Invaded additional countries. Engaged in more killing. Conducted a longer occupation. Then all would have been well.

Indeed, Iraq hawks claimed, the fault for Iraq's collapse was entirely President Obama's *since he followed the Bush withdrawal schedule*. After all, given the disastrous experience of the Bush foreign policy, what responsible U.S. official would conform to the Bush timetable? President Obama should have known the result would be failure. Thus, he should have told the war-weary American people that the U.S. could never leave Iraq, even if the Iraqi people also rejected a continuing U.S. military presence. His failure to do so obviously is why everything fell apart in Iraq.

In fact, even had the administration succeeded in maintaining a garrison, little likely would have changed. Absent an American threat to launch a coup, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would have had no reason to abandon his sectarian course. Washington's only leverage would have been to threaten to withdraw its troops, which, of course, would have frustrated its objective of staying.

Worse would have been deploying American troops against the Maliki regime's domestic enemies. That would have made Washington an active combatant in sectarian conflict, tied America even closer to Maliki, and turned U.S. forces into a lightning rod for discontented Iraqis. Maybe the Islamic State would not have developed. But a repeat Baathist-Sunni insurgency targeting American forces might have arisen.

Of course, recognizing that the Bush administration bears the greatest responsibility for the rise of ISIL gives little guidance on how Washington should respond today. However, experience suggests that renewed American intervention is no less likely than before to stir the whirlwind. Bombing jihadist radicals, supporting authoritarian regimes, taking sides in sectarian conflict, playing multiple sides in Syria, hectoring allied states, and pursuing new but still unattainable objectives in the Middle East offer a multitude of opportunities for bloody blowback. Those designing and implementing Middle Eastern policy should display at least a modicum of humility.

In fact, the Islamic State became a significant U.S. interest only because Washington termed it one. Contra the Obama administration's deceitful claims, ISIL's fighters are insurgents, not terrorists. The Islamic State stands apart from al-Qaeda because the former is seeking to become an organized government rather than a terrorist group. Acting like the latter, especially against America, would risk forfeiting the former.

Of course, the Islamic State's objectives could change. But butchering two Americans who fell into its hands illustrated the group's monstrous philosophy, not its threat potential. Nothing required the U.S. to turn ISIL into an American priority. Indeed, Washington's attempt to thwart the group's regional ambitions might push the group back toward al-Qaeda and the terrorism

business. The Islamic State is an underfunded government, but would be an uncommonly wealthy terrorist operation.

Moreover, if the administration truly believed ISIL to be such a serious threat, its strategy is a bust. U.S. airstrikes have not prevented the group from advancing within 15 miles away of Baghdad Airport and threatening the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border. More effective ground forces are needed, but the administration refuses to take that step. Yet its tepid intervention has discouraged countries with the greater interest in defeating the Islamic State, most notably Turkey, from taking action as well.

Worse, Washington has stepped up its commitment to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria. President Bashar al-Assad is an ugly character, but his army is the best force currently opposing ISIL troops. Aiding the so-called “moderate” insurgents in Syria isn’t likely to give them the wherewithal to defeat both ISIL and Assad, but could be enough to tie down more government forces, enabling the Islamic State to win. If ISIL’s black flag eventually flies over Damascus as a result, the president would be pressed to commit combat forces. He could scarcely allow the Islamic State to triumph against America.

The only serious alternative to fully reentering Iraq is to step out, making clear that ISIL’s neighbors will bear the cost of any further advances. Iraq desperately requires a political solution, one which either radically decentralizes government control or formally dismembers the country. Anti-Baghdad Sunni tribes and former Baathists must be separated from their unnatural ally of convenience with a group dedicated to recreating the 7th century.

Jordan and the Gulf States also have much at stake and have military forces available for use. Most important is Turkey, which alone has some 400,000 men under arms. It fears Kurdish separatism and supports the overthrow of Assad. But a functioning Islamic State on the border would create even bigger problems for Ankara. Washington should inform Turkey that there will be no NATO involvement in a problem Ankara can and should confront.

The administration’s Iraq policy has failed. The U.S. is more entangled in conflict and war; Americans have been killed in retaliation for Washington’s intervention; the Islamic State is still advancing; U.S. allies continue to free ride on America; Washington hopes to square a nonexistent circle in Syria.

Alas, those most responsible for the ongoing debacle in Iraq are most insistent on even more extensive and intensive military intervention. This almost certainly would make the problem worse, much worse.

Indeed, Washington’s strategy has failed almost everywhere in the Middle East. And U.S. missteps continue, with policy seemingly set on permanent repeat. American officials should back out of Iraq, not jump in. This may be President Obama’s final opportunity to avoid a lengthy war which could come to define his legacy as the 2003 Iraq War came to define that of George W. Bush.

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