



Back out of Iraq's new civil war

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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 say no.

American conservatives traditionally rejected domestic social engineering. But the neoconservative takeover of the Republican Party pushed the GOP into social engineering on a global scale.

Alas, it didn't work out in Iraq. 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 that claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives. Bush's legacy was a corrupt, authoritarian, and sectarian state, friendly with Iran and Syria. 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.

The Iraq disaster's architects, however, insisted that nothing had been their fault. Indeed, Iraq hawks claimed, the fault for Iraq's collapse was entirely President Obama's since he followed the Bush withdrawal schedule.

In fact, even had the administration succeeded in maintaining a garrison, little probably 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 the 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.

How should Washington respond today? Renewed American intervention will only 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.

In fact, the Islamic State became a significant U.S. interest only because Washington termed it one. ISIL's fighters are insurgents, not terrorists. The Islamic State stands apart from al-Qaida because the former is seeking to become an organized government rather than a terrorist group.

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.

Ironically, Washington's attempt to thwart the group's regional ambitions might push ISIL toward al-Qaida and the terrorism business. The Islamic State is an underfunded government, but would be an uncommonly wealthy terrorist operation.

Moreover, the administration's strategy is a bust. U.S. airstrikes have not prevented the group from advancing to within 15 miles away of Baghdad Airport and threatening the Syrian-Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border. Yet Washington's tepid intervention has discouraged countries with the greatest interest in defeating the Islamic State, most notably Turkey, from taking action.

Worse, Washington has stepped up its commitment to overthrow Syria's Assad regime. President Bashar al-Assad is an ugly character, but his army is the best force currently opposing ISIL. Aiding the so-called "moderate" insurgents in Syria could tie down government forces, enabling the Islamic State to win. If ISIL's black flag eventually flies over Damascus, the president would be pressed to commit combat forces.

The only serious alternative to fully reentering the war is to step back, making clear that the Islamic State's neighbors will bear the cost of any further advances. Iraq desperately requires a political solution separating anti-Baghdad Sunni tribes and former Baathists from their unlikely ally of convenience, ISIL.

Jordan and the Gulf States also have much at stake and military forces available for use. Most important is Turkey, which alone has some 400,000 men under arms. Washington should inform Ankara that there will be no NATO involvement in a problem Turkey should confront.

The administration's Iraq policy has failed. The U.S. is more entangled in war; Americans have been killed in retaliation for Washington's intervention; the Islamic State is still advancing.

U.S. officials should back out of Iraq, not jump in. This may be President Obama's final opportunity to avoid a lengthy conflict that could come to define his legacy as the 2003 Iraq War came to define that of George W. Bush.

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