

What not to do about the Middle East

Apparently, the United States, perhaps Britain and almost certainly Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are on the brink of a major escalation of war in what now we can call “the former Iraq and Syria.” Are they thinking rationally? Are they drawing lessons from past interventions? Do they have a post-intervention plan? How much will intervention cost? And, finally, will military intervention result in accomplishing the presumed objective of creating security for them and for us?

These are questions they and we should *now* – not after the fact – be asking. Perhaps somewhere deep in government council rooms they are being asked. If so, those asking them are certainly not sharing their answers, if they have any, with us. And since we will be paying the bills for whatever decisions are adopted, we have what in government usage is called a “Need to Know.”

I have no access to the thinking of the inner circles of any of the relevant governments, and from the sketchy and undemanding accounts in the media, it does not appear that anyone else has better access than I. What I do have is 69 years of observation and study of the Middle East of which four were spent as the Member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for the Middle East. This does not give me an up-to-the-minute “take” on events – several journalists provide that much better than I could – but perhaps my years of experience give me a sort of framework in which to place events. So let me sketch answers to the questions citizens should ask:

First, are we thinking rationally and not emotionally? As an old policy planner, that means to me, ‘are we weighing all the questions *before* jumping?’ Unfortunately, the record demonstrates that we leap before we look. In Libya, we didn’t like Qaddafi. He was not a very likeable fellow, but he did enormously raise the living standards of his people and he did keep them from killing one another. Killing him stopped both of these positive results of his rule. What replaced it? Chaos. As the Prime Minister of Italy, whose government is nearly overwhelmed by the flood tide of refugees, remarked, before we destroyed the government of Libya, we should have thought about what its destruction would cause.

In Iraq, we didn’t like Saddam. He too was not a likeable fellow, but under his rule Iraq became one of the most advanced societies in Asia. Its citizens benefitted from free education, free health facilities and a high standard of living. We got rid of him. We did a very good job of destroying “his” Iraq, but no one can find anything positive to say about the leaders and institutions that took Saddam’s place.

And, in Afghanistan, we were angry because the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Ladin to us. It never occurred to ask why they wouldn’t. Indeed, the record shows that we were hardly aware that the inhabitants of the country were Afghans with a cultural tradition with rules of their own. So we rushed in, took over the country and installed a group of people as rulers who *said* they were our kind of folks. We were delighted and have never tried to compare what they said with what they were doing. Policy? Our policy was to throw money at the country. Little of it stuck. Even the Afghan we installed as president, no piker himself when it came to making off with our money, complained that most of what we gave the country ended in foreign bank accounts. So, despite or because of whatever good we thought we

were doing, the country fell apart; drug lords brutally oppressed the people; even in downtown Kabul there was no law; in the countryside drug production skyrocketed; and there is not even one “secure” place in the country.

Are these expensive ventures – several hundred thousand dead and many more seriously injured, whole cities that took generations to build wrecked along with perhaps 5 *trillion* dollars of our money spent and the whole area turned into a no man’s land – being taken as something we should learn from? I see no signs that they are. Instead of the “best and the brightest,” our leaders appear to be simply the most “determined and closed minded.” When a tactic fails, they loudly and repeatedly urge that it be implemented again in the next crisis.

To try to find something positive to say about these ventures, all I can come up with is that there were moments of tactical success amidst the absence of strategy. We know *how* to destroy buildings, to find and kill insurgents and to dole out money. We just don’t know *whether* to do any of these things or not.

We do them because we know how and have the means. Then when institutions are perverted or collapse, insurgency continues, all law and order breaks down, populations flee, and “collaterally” drug production multiplies, money is wasted on a colossal scale while those we were trying to help sit on their hands. Or, ore likely put their hands in our pockets. We manfully do the same things all over again. We really don’t like to hear about previous failures. So, for example, we just don’t “know” where hundreds of millions of dollars worth of aid to Afghanistan went and don’t want to find out.¹

The next two questions are at least simple to ask and to answer: we had no feasible post-intervention plan in Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya and the costs, as I detailed above, aggregate to unending warfare the monetary costs of which so far, are measured in the trillions of dollars. The “collateral” damages, I predict, will begin to include “revenge” attacks on America, Europe and on our assets abroad. Derivatives of these events will be measured in the growth of fear, the decline of trust in one another and the eroding of our civic culture. Who could put a cost figure on them?

In short, it would be difficult to design policies more calculated to destroy our sense of well-being than military adventures abroad. After all, we got together as a nation-state, among other thing, to “secure The Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...” As our first President, George Washington, warned us, “The peace often, sometimes perhaps the Liberty, of Nations has been the victim” of imprudent action. We should put his advice into a modern context and heed it. Let tomorrow be a new day of inspiration.

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¹ The Congressionally mandated Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has just issued another one of his astonishing reports on incompetence, waste and corruption. This, dated July 1, 2015, deals with the disappearance of a relatively small amount, only \$210 million. As the reporting officer said, “to prove meaningful oversight of these facilities, [we] need to know where they are.” But “Thirteen coordinates were not located in Afghanistan, with one located in the Mediterranean Sea. Coordinates for 30 facilities were located in a province different from the one USAID reported. In 13 cases, USAID reported two different funded facilities at the same coordinates. 189 showed no physical structure within 400 feet of the reported coordinates, and a subset of 81, or just under half of these locations, showed no physical structure within a half mile of the reported coordinates. [And] 154 coordinates did not clearly identify a specific building.” The US military command tried to close SIGAR’s ability to report by classifying its findings: thus Americans would be kept from knowing what every peddler in the Kabul bazar knows in detail.