

The United States' Islamist Allies of Convenience

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September 16, 2013



In just one decade, the U.S. has intervened militarily in three Muslim-majority countries and overthrown their governments. Now, the same coalition of U.S. liberal interventionists and neoconservatives that promoted those wars is pushing for punitive airstrikes in Syria without reflecting on how U.S. policy has ended up strengthening Islamists and fostering anti-Americanism. Indeed, the last "humanitarian intervention" has clearly backfired, turning Libya into a breeding ground for transnational militants.

U.S. President Barack Obama has stressed that a punitive attack on Syria is not off the table, particularly if the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad does not comply with the chemical weapons disarmament agreement, a high probability. The push to attack Syria among some U.S. conservatives is not about upholding the U.S.'s national interest. Rather, the desire to protect U.S. "credibility" has become the last refuge of those seeking yet another war in the wider Middle East.

U.S. foreign policy has exacerbated a growing conflict between Islamist and secular forces.

If "credibility" were purged from the debate and the focus placed squarely on advancing long-term U.S. interests, it would become apparent that an attack on Syria might not yield even temporary geopolitical gains. Beyond the short term, it would unleash major unintended consequences, potentially including an Iraq-style "soft" partition of Syria and the creation of a haven for extremists stretching across much of Islamist-controlled northern Syria and into the Sunni areas of Iraq.

If Obama does revert to attack, it would most likely increase U.S. reliance on unsavory Islamist rulers in countries ranging from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Some Arab monarchs have pledged to bankroll a U.S. attack, an investment that they would easily recover given that the war talk has already increased oil prices.

Al-Qaida-type groups already have gained ground in the Middle East and North Africa as an unintended byproduct of U.S. policies, creating fertile conditions for stepped-up international terrorism in the coming years. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, for example, created a major opening for al-Qaida, whose affiliates now represent the Sunni struggle against the Shiite-dominated government.

Likewise, regime change in Libya aided the rise of al-Qaida-linked militants, leading to the killing of the U.S. Ambassador in Benghazi. A system based on Sharia, or Islamic law, has been imposed, human rights abuses are legion, and cross-border movement of weapons and militants has undermined the security of Libya's neighbors.

Meanwhile, U.S. support for the regimes in Yemen and Saudi Arabia has contributed to the rise of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. In parts of southern Yemen, an al-Qaida affiliate functions as a de facto government.

In Syria, where sizable chunks of territory are already under Islamist control and the pro-al-Qaida al-Nusra Front overshadows the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army, the Obama administration is staring at the bitter harvest of its previous policy choices. If Obama ultimately decides on a punitive airstrike, this would merely make matters worse by undercutting the moderate opposition's grassroots legitimacy and aiding Islamist forces.

Farther east, the U.S. wants an "honorable" exit from Afghanistan, the longest war in its history, through a peace deal with the Taliban, its main battlefield opponent. In seeking to co-opt the Taliban — an effort that has resulted in the Taliban establishing what amounts to a diplomatic mission in Doha, Qatar — the U.S. is bestowing legitimacy on a thuggish militia that enforces medieval practices in the areas under its control.

U.S. dalliances with Islamist-leaning political forces have been guided by the notion that the cloak of Islam helps to protect the credibility of leaders who might otherwise be seen as foreign puppets. That simply will not work, even in the short term. On the contrary, until the Egyptian army removed him from the presidency in July, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi was coming to be seen by many as Washington's man in Cairo.

In the long term, the U.S. will gain nothing — and risk much — by continuing to back oil sheikhdoms that fund Muslim extremist groups and madrassas from the Philippines and India to South Africa and Venezuela. By supporting Islamist rulers, the U.S. is contributing to a trend of Muslims killing Muslims, evident from the Maghreb to the badlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

U.S. policy has also contributed to a growing conflict between Islamist and secular forces in Muslim countries. This is best illustrated by Turkey, where Obama has ignored Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's heavy-handed efforts to annul free speech and turn himself into a 21st-century sultan.

There and elsewhere, the U.S., motivated by the larger geopolitical goal of containing Shia Iran and its regional allies, has embraced Sunni rulers steeped in religious and political bigotry, even though they pose a transnational threat to the values of freedom and secularism. Moreover, the clash within Islam is likely to be destabilizing regionally and counterproductive to the interests of the free world.

Against this background, Obama should heed the doctrine proposed in 1991 by U.S. General Colin Powell. The Powell doctrine stipulates that the U.S. should use military force only when a vital national security interest is at stake; the strategic objective is clear and attainable; the benefits are likely to outweigh the costs; adverse consequences can be limited; broad international and domestic support has been obtained; and a plausible exit strategy is in place.

Given the U.S. record since the Powell doctrine was formulated, another criterion should be added: the main beneficiaries of military intervention are not the U.S.'s mortal enemies.

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