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US Intervention Will Only Make Middle Eastern Turmoil Worse

By Ivan Eland

June 30, 2015

Recently, the U.S. government has been dealt setbacks in five of the seven developing, Islamic countries in which its military recently has attacked or invaded since 9/11 – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen. In the other two countries, Pakistan and Somalia, the situation remains extremely unstable.

In Syria and Iraq, the brutal ISIS group, which is mainly a threat to the nearby Middle East region, captured the cities of Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. In Afghanistan, the Taliban attacked the parliament building in Kabul, the capital, overran two northern districts, and threatened the major city of Kunduz. Such Taliban gains in the north are unusual, because their traditional strength in Afghanistan has been in Pashtun tribal areas in the south and east. In Libya, the U.S.-led overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, using air attacks, has resulted in a split country with war between tribal factions using Gaddafi's plentiful arms stockpiles, radical jihadist bases being set up, and ISIS taking over the coastal city of Sirte. In Yemen, despite US air strikes and drone attacks over the years, and Saudi Arabian air strikes more recently, the Iran-friendly Shi'ite Houthi rebels have overran much of the country and put the US and Saudi-backed Hadi regime into exile. Also Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula, an affiliate of the main group, has taken advantage of the anarchy in Yemen to expand its territory.

The American media report on all of this turmoil with great hype, as if most of these faraway conflicts impinge greatly on US security. Most of them don't. Of course, this nationalist media coverage always makes it seem natural that the US military should be intervening in all of these countries to "do something" about their problems to prevent jihadist groups from arising or expanding. Yet the evidence seems to show that US military interventions create more jihadists (for example, as documented by journalists in Yemen) or new and worse groups (the US invasion created al Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into ISIS).

Yet radical Islamists existed for decades before 9/11, posing little or no threat to the distant United States. In fact, during the Cold War, the United States fueled Islamist jihadism to battle communism – for example, aiding the Mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan, which would morph into the original al Qaeda group.

Since the United States rarely leaves completely anywhere its military has been – for example, Europe, Japan, Korea, and now Afghanistan and Iraq – it is hard for the public to avoid the fear of the resulting consequences that the bipartisan foreign policy elite has instilled about such an "unthinkable" policy option. Yet one such example exists that might prove instructive – Ronald Reagan's ignominious withdrawal from Lebanon after the Iran-supported Hezbollah group blew up a Marine barracks, killing 241 US military personnel.

Of course, Reagan's first mistake was sending "peacekeeping" troops to Lebanon to help Israel – whose leaders had lied to the United States about the expansiveness of its war aims – stabilize the country after the Israeli invasion force withdrew in 1983. US forces ended up getting enmeshed in a civil war, fighting Muslim factions on behalf of an Israeli-supported Christian minority government. The bombing by Hezbollah of the Marine barracks was in retaliation for that one-sided US intervention. The instructive point here, however, is what happened after Reagan withdrew US forces from Lebanon – Hezbollah gradually attenuated its attacks on US targets.

Groups – even radical or brutal ones such as Hezbollah, al Qaeda, or ISIS – rarely attack for no reason. Most Americans believe they are either "crazies" or are attacking US targets because they are jealous of the United States being the best country in the world – or as George W. Bush put it more subtly after 9/11, they are attacking the United States because of its "freedoms." When Bush told the American people this whopper, it infuriated Osama bin Laden so much that he again stated why he was attacking the United States – essentially US meddling in Muslim lands.

Americans also think that if you try too hard to explain the motives of such groups then you are taking their side, not playing on the "American team," or are condoning their brutal tactics. Yet any general of any competence knows that you need to understand your enemy and what motivates his attacks. In fact, it is dangerous to remain oblivious to the reason the adversary is attacking, as most Americans have since 9/11.

Clearly, Muslims do not like non-Muslims attacking, invading, or intervening in Islamic lands. They were sick of it in the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s when the colonial empires did it and they continued to be sick of it when the United States took over policing the Middle East for these declining empires after World War II.

Yet what Americans perceive as an increasingly violent and chaotic Islamic world is not all America's fault. Even before US post-World War II interventions, such regions were often in turmoil. However, since World War II, US interventions have made often things worse through unintended consequences and have put a bull's eye on American targets for retaliatory attacks.

If the United States would tone down its policy in the Middle East and the broader Islamic world, radical Islamists would not go away – they have always been there – but they would be far less likely to attack US targets – as the example of Lebanon indicates.