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Romancing the Sunni: A US policy tragedy in three acts; Act I

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Lifting the veil

Today, as Daesh/ISIS — a sub-sect of Sunni Islam — murders and encourages murdering Americans, our foreign policy establishment argues that doubling down on efforts to “gain the confidence” of Sunni states, potentates, and peoples will lead them to turn against the jihadis among themselves and to fight Daesh with “boots on the ground.”

For more than a quarter century, as Americans have suffered trouble from the Muslim world’s Sunni and Shia components and as the perennial quarrel between them has intensified, the US government has taken the side of the Sunni. This has not worked out well for us. It is past time for our government to sort out our own business, and to mind it aggressively.



President George W. Bush doing sword dance with then prince (now Saudi king) Salman bin Abdul Aziz in 2008.

To understand why hopes for help from the Sunni side are forlorn, we must be clear that jihadism in general and Daesh in particular are logical outgrowths of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's (and the Gulf monarchies') official religion, about how they fit in the broader conflict between Sunni and Shia, as well as about how the US occupation of Iraq exposed America to the vagaries of intra-Muslim conflicts.

Alas, the conservative side of American public life wrapped the Sunni world's role in terrorism in new layers of confusion when it supported President George W. Bush's decision to occupy Iraq. By involving America in an intra-Muslim struggle on the Sunni side, Bush led his constituency falsely to equate cooperation with the Sunni with the fight against terrorism.

Outsourcing security

US foreign policy in the Middle East had moved to the Sunni side in 1979 after the Shia Islamic Republic's overthrow of Iran's secular Shah. For the previous quarter century, the Shah's Iran had taken care of US interests in the region while muting its Persian Shia people's perennial tensions with the Sunni Arab world.

But Iran's Islamic Republic has been as aggressively Shia and Persian as it has been anti-American. Fatefully, rather than answering in kind the Islamic Republic's warfare on America, all presidents since Jimmy Carter have searched the Sunni Arab world for counterweights to Iran, as well as for the kind of support that the Shah had given us.

This attempt to outsource America's security concerns by entering into the Sunni-Shia conflict on the Sunni side has been counterproductive because the Sunni, 85% of the Muslim world, are also the nursery of its most contagious plagues — the Wahhabi sect and the Muslim Brotherhood. Above all, it has been disastrous because it has led the US government to lose sight of our own interests by confusing them with those of Sunni states and potentates.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are places where royal families and their huge retinues live sybaritic lives, where work — high and low — is done by foreigners who are despised for doing it, where expensively equipped armed forces are fit only for inter-dynastic strife and civil repression, and where foreign policy consists of paying for protection.

At odds with one another as well as conflicted internally, they cannot wield significant force on their own behalf — never mind on behalf of America. Impressions to the contrary are due to the favors they lavish on the US officials and businessmen who deal with them.

Failing to choose our own side

The main Sunni monarchies' congenital worse-than-uselessness is why, in the decade after Iranian Islamic Republic's establishment, US policymakers vigorously courted Iraq's Saddam Hussein, who ruled mostly-Shia Iraq with a bloody hand through its Sunni minority. The US policymakers who helped Saddam prevail in his war against Iran believed that, by so doing, they could strike a blow at Iran while weaning Saddam away from his reliance on the Soviet Union.

Too clever. No sooner had Saddam established his power over the head of the Gulf than he used it to conquer Kuwait, after which the Gulf's monarchs were helpless before his disciplined army and frightened by their own peoples' support for Saddam. They asked the United States' help.

Facing a fateful choice, US policymakers refused to make it. Instead, by trying to adjust the results of intra-Sunni strife, they set US interests adrift on that strife's tides. Consider: If these officials were *really* seeking a formidable Sunni power to confront Iran, they could have declined to interfere as Saddam became the Gulf's overlord, rather redoubling their courtship of him. This was Bush 41's original instinct.

On the other hand, if these officials *really* believed that Saddam's ambitions outweighed his usefulness against Iran they could have made war on Saddam to remove him as an obstacle to US policy. But this would have meant breaking his empire over Iraq's Shia majority, and dealing with the Iraqi empire's successor states. Either choice made sense from America's standpoint.

But instead of choosing any version of America's own interest, US statesmen confused that interest with the self-contradictory demands of the Saudis, etc. — the Sunni world's weak reeds: Please, make war on Saddam, but not so hard as to break his Iraqi Sunni empire. This way we can all win without dealing with the consequences of victory. We can have our cake while eating it too.

Our bipartisan ruling class, from the Bush and Clinton families to the Dick Cheneys and Colin Powells to Washington's think tanks considered this counsel to be sophistication, and themselves to be sophisticates for accepting it. Far too clever.

The ensuing *bellum interruptus* was meant to tweak the balance among the Mid-East's Sunni forces. But the result was that Saddam, who'd not been an enemy of the United States, subsequently led the Muslim world to new heights of enmity to America. Few remember that the longest and most impassioned part of Osama bin Laden's 1996 *fatwa* which preceded the wave of anti-American terrorism that crested on 9/11 was a denunciation of America's actions against Saddam's Iraq.

Secondarily, the *fatwa* denounced the presence of US troops on Muslim soil which had become necessary in the aftermath of a US military action conceived to avoid the necessary consequences of victory. Notwithstanding contrived talk of chemical and biological weapons,

politics proved to be Saddam's weapon of mass destruction. His actual role as an engine of anti-American violence is what led to the 2003 US invasion. This was America's business.

The occupation's tragic irony

The removal of the iron hand that had kept the Iraqi empire together necessarily led to its separation into its component parts. In May of 2003, fully aware of this but deeming it Iraqis' business, the US Department of Defense was planning to withdraw troops.

But the Sunni states — which had opposed the invasion strenuously — convinced Bush 43 to occupy Iraq indefinitely. That involved taking care of their business. He agreed to confuse others' business with America's despite having been elected in part by promising never to engage in “nation building.”

Bush promised to build “a united, democratic Iraq.” That was always an absurdity because, since Iraq's constituent groups loathed and feared each other, Iraq's unity could result only from one group's despotism over the others, whereas “democracy” — i.e. the will of the people — meant that Iraqis would go their separate ways.

The occupation's day-to-day practical objective however, was to hold the 83% of Iraqis who were not Sunni into a state structure in which the Sunni would salvage at least some of the privileges they had held under Saddam. That is what the Sunni states wanted, and that is what they had convinced the US government was in America's interest as well. It was also impossible. Immediately, the occupation started a Sunni war on America that is yet to end.

The Iraq occupation's fundamental reality was tragically ironic. Iraq's Sunni minority made war on the Americans for the purpose of re conquering their former privileges *even though the American occupation's practical purpose was to secure for them as many of those privileges as possible, while shielding them from the vengeance that the Shia majority was primed to visit on them.*

The Sunni fought America because they resented that the US invasion had broken their cozy empire. They terrorized the Shia because they believed that they were natural underlings, sheep, whom they could easily subject to their rule had not the Americans gotten in the way. This error cost them dearly

This tragic irony existed on the international level as well: Even as the Saudi government was urging the US government to persist in the occupation and to make its policies Sunni-friendlier, a substantial portion the Saudi regime was financing Iraq's Sunni anti American warriors. Just as significant for the future, Saudi Arabia's and the Gulf monarchies' religious establishments were preaching jihad against the Americans, which convinced countless jihadis to go to Iraq.

Thus, between mid 2003 and mid 2006, American troops in Iraq were being shot and bombed by a Sunni combination that included remnants of Saddam's security services, ordinary local Sunni, and foreign jihadis.

The wonder of it all is that the US ruling class managed to digest this reality into the abstract narrative on which American politics ruminated and on the basis of which it doomed thousands

of Americans to death and maiming in replenished minefields: namely that the Iraqis doing the bombing were fighting not for local dominance or sectarian animus but against the American way of life; that securing peace for America required creating a “united democratic Iraq,” that doing this, required “getting the Sunni to buy into” the idea; and that this required further limiting the claims of Iraq’s majority Shia while doing even more to entice the Sunni who were shooting and bombing both Americans and Shia.

This is the delusion that establishment Republican organs — the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, etc. — still excrete.