

Report

Forgotten Lessons: in Syria, U.S. repeats Afghanistan mistakes

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6 July 2015





Many Americans view ISIL as the No 1 threat facing the US in Middle East, according to a survey [Reuters]

Abstract

The U.S. failure to vanquish Islamic State extremists reminds us of the unlearned lessons of the conflicts in Afghanistan of the 1990s, out of which Al Qaida and IS sprang. The sole superpower can't abandon an ungoverned space and the wars that this generates, but must support the most moderate forces it can find on the ground to achieve a stable end state. Disengagement, pretending to have a policy or subcontracting to a local power under international sanctions are a formula for spurring the extremists on.

Introduction

One year after it burst onto the international stage by capturing Mosul, the Islamic State (IS) still controls vast swaths of Iraq and Syria. It continues to recruit new cannon fodder, to capture territory and carry out grisly executions. Incredible though it sounds, IS has outwitted the United States and the international coalition it rallied to combat the extremists.

IS's military adroitness, political skills and propaganda machine helped it survive. But a good deal of the fault lies with the United States and the failure to apply the lessons of its own recent history.⁽¹⁾ It was American disengagement from Afghanistan during the 1990s that led to the rise of al Qaida in the first place. The pattern is repeating itself in the Middle East, as the U.S. leads a limited war in Iraq and Syria against Al Qaida's spinoff. Far from halting the violent Islamists, this has given them the opening to flourish and expand.

The story begins in 1989, an astonishing year that opened with the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and ended with the opening of the Berlin Wall and the East Europe revolutions. The Soviet Empire collapsed, and a new era began with one superpower, no defined order and a hands-off stance toward the security issues that developed on its periphery. This power vacuum allowed many state actors to flourish in the Middle East and in other regions. This paved the way for non-state actors such as IS, al –Qaida, al Shabaab, to appear and recruit Islamic sympathizers.

Origins of the Islamic State

The rise of radical Islamists is a tale of five wars. The United States played an active but covert role in the anti-Soviet war of the 1980's, and had no problem at the time with the Islamist volunteers under the control of no state. After the war ended, the U.S. was barely aware when the volunteers formed al Qaida.

Less well known is that Afghanistan's internal conflict from 1996 to 2001, which pitted the Taliban principally against Massoud, gave bin Laden the opening to establish a state-within-a-state.

The attacks of 9/11 led to American intervention and the third war. Taliban forces fled to fight another day, as Afghan contenders so often do. But the Bush administration underestimated the task of bringing security to Afghanistan, and the Taliban returned. Volunteers flocked again to the scene, among them Arabs who met up in Khorasan. They're fighting now in Syria and call themselves the Khorasanis.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq, the fourth war, offered Al Qaida new prospects. In disbanding the Iraqi army, the U.S. created a security vacuum that it could not fill. That was the opening for a nascent Iraqi Al Qaida branch to team up with ex-Baathists in an insurgency against the U.S. presence. They had help from Bashar al Assad in Syria, who feared he was next in line and sent Syrian and foreign volunteers into Iraq.

The War in Syria

Syria's national uprising began as a peaceful citizens' protest, but Assad responded with force. He then opened his jails and released the jihadists who'd fought in Iraq and that he'd been holding since 2009. When Al Qaida in Iraq began to send fighters, he did nothing to stop them. Thus began war number five.

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham broke off from Nusra in April 2013 and seized towns in northern Syria from moderate rebels, Assad attacked the rebels. When IS set

up its sanctuary in Raqqa, sent convoys back and forth to Iraq, and captured Mosul in June, it acted with impunity.

Could IS have grown to its current threat without the sanctuary in the ungoverned spaces of Syria? Could it have captured Mosul without Assad's knowledge? All we know is that Assad watched the preparations and did nothing to stop them.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy in Syria has been a replay of the Afghanistan story. The name has changed as has its leader, but the foe is the same, with similar goals and methods, and a lot of experience under its belt. The extremists have adapted and learned from the past. But has the U.S.?

The Syrian uprising generated a security vacuum in the northern provinces, which moderate rebels tried to fill. They needed outside support to establish a proper military structure. But the U.S. provided political backing and gave the uprising only fitful military support. Today, the moderate rebels are led by professional officers, and the fighters are largely trained conscripts, also defectors. As in Afghanistan, pro-western forces in Syria are imperfect but preferable than the radicals. But they get just enough support to survive, not to prevail.

Just as his predecessors ceded policy control in Afghanistan to Pakistan, a government that was under U.S. sanctions, President Obama seems to accord Iran, which is still under wide-ranging international sanctions, a sphere of influence in Syria and Lebanon. But Iran is Assad's main backer and bears responsibility for his military operations against civilians and for importing foreign fighters, and his failure to attack the Islamic State. The administration sees Iran as a potential partner in fighting terrorism; every other country in the region sees Iran is a source of the problem.

Similar to Clinton's failed responses in 1998, Obama's decision to train and equip an entirely new force to fight IS may deflect domestic criticism, but the plan is unworkable, for it asks Syrians to fight for U.S. goals rather than for their country. It also ignores tens of thousands Syrian refugees, who say they will fight to win back their country from the Islamic State and from Assad if they had arms and support.

Instead of providing intelligence, logistical support and close air cover to forces that want keep Syria united and build a state under law, the U.S. has thrown in its lot with a Kurdish militia linked to the Kurdistan Worker's Party, which seeks an independent Kurdish state. U.S. airstrikes in Kobani in late 2014 were an attempt to avoid a humiliating defeat before TV cameras on the eve of U.S. midterm elections; and the Kurds' capture of Tal Abyad in mid-June was a tactical advance with no strategic plan.

The search for a political solution in Syria also derives straight from the Afghanistan playbook. Asking the UN to conduct talks without the threat of the use of force as a backup didn't work in Afghanistan and is unlikely to work here. One of the U.N.'s most gifted mediators, Lakhdar Brahimi, took on the task in Syria as he did in Afghanistan. He quit both in frustration.

Top U.S. officials know the policy makes little sense, but they won't explain it and duck for cover at the first sign of tough questions. Similarly, there's silence over the war crimes. If the U.S. won't agree to create a no-fly zone to protect Syrian civilians and won't intervene to stop the barrel-bombing of civilians in Aleppo, can it deny Syrians the right of self-defense? Finally, just as in Afghanistan, Washington has swept the issue of refugees under the carpet. Only 308 were accepted up to December 2014.

The United States Dilemma in a New World Order

When an empire collapses, power vacuums develop along the periphery that can lead to security vacuums and civil war. From there it's a short path to regional conflict. Local and regional wars have given rise to the evils of this post Cold War era, providing cover for terrorists, war criminals and drug production and opening the way to far bigger wars. Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had a better grasp of the inherent opportunity in such conflicts than the U.S. did.

After Russian troops left Afghanistan, civil war broke out over control of the state. There is no question that the U.S. had a moral obligation to help put the country right. No American died in the anti-Soviet war, but one million Afghans did, and their sacrifice helped bring the Cold War to an end on U.S. terms.

Yet leaders of both U.S. political parties opted for disengagement. Washington closed the Kabul embassy, withdrew aid, failed to name an ambassador or special envoy then turned over the security file to Pakistan and diplomacy to the United Nations.

Pakistan, which was the target of U.S. military sanctions, saw no reason to work for U.S. interests. Asking the UN to find a diplomatic solution but not supporting it with the threat of the use of force was a cover for a lack of policy. It fooled no one but the American public.

As internal wars between the Taliban and its opponents destroyed the country and drove millions into foreign refuge, the U.S. stayed neutral. And that is one of the lessons of the 1990s: in an ungoverned space, the sole superpower but has to choose sides, if possible picking the player that has a secure political base and is most likely to support a stabile outcome. Allies like guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Massoud may be imperfect, but they should not be treated as lepers. Massoud was the enemy of the U.S. enemy, and

the failure to treat him as a friend added to the security vacuum. Bin Laden did not stay neutral. By committing ground forces to aid the militarily hapless Taliban, bin Laden found an excellent camouflage for his own agenda.

Afghanistan is also an object lesson in the risks of letting the domestic agenda undercut national security interests. In 1998, after Al Qaida attacked two U.S. embassies in east Africa, the U.S. fired cruise missiles at its Afghan training camps - a gesture allayed public outrage at home but failed to hurt Bin Laden and in fact enhanced his ability to recruit fighters.

This was a moment when the U.S. urgently needed Pakistan to crack down on the Taliban for hosting Osama bin Laden. Instead of pursuing that priority, Bill Clinton caved to Congressional Democrats and approved tough new sanctions against Pakistan for testing a nuclear weapon. As those new sanctions took hold, cooperation with Pakistan ceased.

Clinton did some things right, such as putting the spotlight on war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but he failed to demand similar accountability in Afghanistan. U.S. silence helped create a climate of impunity in Afghanistan that led to more war crimes and embittered the population. Abdul Rahim Dostum's killing of captured Taliban in 1997 in Mazar I Sharif set the stage for the Taliban's mass murder of Hazaras in that city in 1998. In 2001, the U.S. military covered up when Dostum's men killed thousands of Taliban by suffocating them in containers. A cycle of revenge undercut U.S. standing in the country, bearing out the lesson: uphold humanitarian law in all circumstances.

Finally, Afghanistan should have taught Americans that when refugees flee by the millions, something truly terrible has happened and it must be stopped. There were 4 million refugees in neighboring countries plus millions more internally displaced. The Taliban were responsible. But in the five years up to 1999, the U.S. accepted only 103 Afghan refugees.

U.S. counter-insurgency and the troop surge of troops stabilized Iraq, but their departure at the end of 2011 – which the Obama administration played up to the domestic audience as a success - reopened the security vacuum. The Maliki government could not fill it. Iran tried, but al Qaida was most successful.

Conclusion

The most disturbing aspect of the story is a policy built on pretense. As the U.S. washed its hands of Afghanistan in the 1990s, Washington has failed to engage in the Middle East. Four wars are now under way, in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, but worse yet, a

Sunni-Shiite war, could still happen. Some U.S. foreign policy experts even anticipate a 30 years religious war, as the one that devastated Europe in the 17th century. And they still see that they have no reason to risk a single American life to bring stability.

The 9/11 attacks shattered the illusion that it was safe to abandon Afghanistan. Now the question now is what sort of disaster will lead the U.S. to reengage in the Middle East and once again work effectively for peace and stability?

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References

1. My analysis of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in the 1990s draws from my book, *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and the Hijacking of Afghanistan*, Second Edition. Pp. 410. Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2013.