

Would US Intervention Help Syria?

Political pressure is building on the Obama administration to intervene in Syria's civil war on the side of the anti-government rebels, but an escalation of the violence might only prolong the conflict and prevent serious national reconciliation, say Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett at RaceForIran.com.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

Across most of the American political spectrum, policy elites are urging that the United States double down on the Obama administration's failing Syria policy. America's reliably pro-intervention senatorial trio (Lindsay Graham, Joseph Lieberman, and John McCain) recently argued that the "risks of inaction in Syria," now outweigh the downsides of American military involvement.

Last week, the Washington Post prominently featured a piece by Ken Pollack, asserting that negotiated settlements "rarely succeed in ending a civil war" like that in Syria, even though that is precisely what ended the civil war in Lebanon, right next door to Syria. From this faulty premise, Pollack argues that the only way to end a civil war like that in Syria is through military intervention.

(After his scandalously wrong case for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, we wonder why the Washington Post or anyone else would give Pollack a platform for disseminating his views on virtually any Middle Eastern topic, but especially not for a piece dealing with the advisability of another U.S. military intervention in the region. In this regard, we note that the bio line at the end of Ken's op-ed makes no mention of his book that made the case for the U.S. invading Iraq, *The Threatening Storm*, describing him instead as "the author of *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East*.)

A more chilling, and, in some ways, more candid, indicator of the direction in which the debate over American policy toward Syria is heading was provided last week in Foreign Policy by Robert Haddick (managing editor of the hawkish blog, Small War Journal).

Remarkably, Haddick argues that: "rather than attempting to influence the course of Syria's civil war, something largely beyond Washington's control, U.S. policymakers should instead focus on strengthening America's diplomatic position and on building irregular warfare capabilities that will be crucial in future conflicts in the region.

"Modest and carefully circumscribed intervention in Syria, in coordination with

America's Sunni allies who are already players in the war, will bolster critical relationships and irregular warfare capabilities the United States and its allies will need for the future."

And why is bolstering these relationships and capabilities so critical? Because, as Haddick writes, "The conflict in Syria is just one front in the ongoing competition between Iran and America's Sunni allies on the west side of the Persian Gulf. The Sunni countries have a strong interest in stepping up their irregular warfare capabilities if they are to keep pace with Iran during the ongoing security competition. The civil war in Syria provides an opportunity for the United States and its Sunni allies to do just that.

"U.S. and GCC intelligence officers and special forces could use an unconventional warfare campaign in Syria as an opportunity to exchange skills and training, share resources, improve trust, and establish combined operational procedures. Such field experience would be highly useful in future contingencies. Equally important, it would reassure the Sunni countries that the United States will be a reliable ally against Iran."

Foreign Policy has become arguably the leading online venue for topical discussion of key issues on America's international agenda. And it is giving its platform to an argument that Washington should leverage the "opportunity" provided by the civil war in Syria to help its regional allies get better at killing Shi'a.

And Washington should do this for the goal of prevailing in "the ongoing security competition" between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States (along with America's "Sunni allies).

Such trends in the American policy debate show an appalling incapacity to learn either from either current experience or history. And these trends are, in fact, influencing actual policy.

Late last week, during a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Turkey, Ankara and Washington agreed that "a unified task force with intelligence, military and political leaders from both countries would be formed immediately to track Syria's present and plan for its future."

After meeting with her Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoğlu, Secretary Clinton said that the United States and Turkey are discussing various options for supporting opposition forces working to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad, including the possibility of imposing a no-fly zone over rebel-held territory in Syria.

In the wake of Clinton's remarks, Flynt Leverett appeared on CCTV's World

Insight weekly newsmagazine to discuss the internal and international dimensions of the Syrian conflict. Flynt and both of the other guests on the segment, Jia Xiudong from the China Institute of International Studies and our colleague Seyed Mohammad Marandi from the University of Tehran, agreed, contra Pollack, that the only way to resolve what has become a civil war in Syria is through an inclusive political process.

Getting to the heart of the matter, Flynt pointed out that “the United States and its regional partners are trying to use Syria to shift the balance of power in the Middle East in ways that they think will be bad for Iran.” This strategy is “ultimately doomed to fail”, but, as long as Washington and others are pursuing it, “the international community is going to be challenged to find ways to keep the violence from getting worse and try to get a political process started.”

Flynt also observed that China and other players in the international community have historical grounds for concern about the imposition of a no-fly zone in Syria to create so-called “humanitarian safe havens” could lead to: since the end of the Cold War, every time that the United States has imposed humanitarian safe havens, in Somalia, Bosnia, Iraq, and most recently in Libya, this has ultimately resulted in a heavily militarized intervention by the United States and its partners in pursuit of coercive regime change.

In part, American elites persist in their current course regarding Syria because they continue to persuade themselves that, in the “security competition” between America and Iran, the United States is winning and the Islamic Republic is losing.

At roughly the same time that Pollack and Haddick were holding forth last week, the New York Times offered an Op-Ed by Harvey Morris purporting to explain Iran’s “paranoia” over Syria’s civil war by describing “What Syria Looks Like from Tehran.”

Morris claims that “the impact of regime change in the Arab World has in fact been largely negative from Tehran’s perspective. The Muslim Brotherhood leadership in Egypt is closer to Saudi Arabia than it is to Iran. If the Alawite-dominated regime in Damascus were to fall, it would mean the loss of a non-Sunni ally.”

Our analysis, of both of Tehran’s perspective on and the reality of how the Arab Spring is affecting the regional balance of power, is diametrically opposite to Morris’s. For an actual (and genuinely informed) Iranian view, we note that Al

Jazeera devoted last week's episode of its Inside Syria series to the topic, "Can Iran Help End the Syrian Crisis?"

Once again, our colleague from the University of Tehran, Seyed Mohammad Marandi, gave a clear and concise exposition of Iranian views on the imperatives of and requirements for serious mediation of the struggle in (and over) Syria.

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<http://www.raceforiran.com/how-much-will-america%e2%80%99s-animus-against-iran-distort-u-s-policy-toward-syria.>]

A New Egyptian Government Rises

Egypt's moderate Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, is picking his way through hot political coals as a new governing system rises from the embers of the old. But his ad hoc constitutionalism is not unprecedented; indeed, it is how the United States was forged, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Much we still do not know about the background to the ouster of senior figures in the Egyptian military. Specifically, it is unclear to what extent President Mohamed Morsi enjoyed the approval or even the active cooperation of elements within the military.

We know there has been discontent within the military ranks about the performance of the top brass, entirely apart from any larger political issues about the distribution of power. The recent incident at a border post in the Sinai, in which Egyptian soldiers were killed and military leaders were widely criticized for letting security deteriorate in that corner of the country, was a ready-made occasion for shaking up the top ranks.

Whatever cards Morsi had been dealt, he evidently played them skillfully in making the changes in the military leadership positions as well as reclaiming for his office some powers that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)

had earlier claimed for itself. Beyond that, we are largely in the dark.

Even if we had a more complete picture of these events, it would be impossible to predict where this political drama leads or what the next chapter in Egypt's still-turbulent story will look like. The perceptions and emotions of the Egyptian public, not just the bilateral interchange between the president and the generals, will have a lot to do with this.

In trying to interpret the drama and its larger significance, it does not help simply to mark a scorecard in which political Islamists including Morsi are regarded as the bad guys and to observe that in this instance the bad guys unfortunately seem to have scored some points.

Nor is it helpful, starting with the same automatic aversion to anything Islamist, to try to analyze the political interplay in terms of formal but temporary constitutional powers by noting that Morsi had no constitutional authority to snatch certain powers back from the SCAF. Of course he didn't, and neither did the SCAF have any such authority to snatch them in the first place.

In Egypt today there is a bizarre coexistence between, on one hand, legal structures which sound familiar to us such as constitutions and courts, along with much discussion about legality or illegality within that framework, and on the other hand a dynamic of power and legitimacy that does not stay within that framework and plays out in large part outside it.

We have seen something similar for years in Pakistan, where dark-suited lawyers have been prominent demonstrators in the streets and where the rulings of a constitutional court get lots of attention amid glaring extra-constitutional actions such as military coups.

Marc Lynch has appropriately likened the political story that has been unfolding in Egypt over the past two years to Calvinball, a game played by a comic strip character who made up the rules as he went along.

Even constitutional structures that we are accustomed to thinking of as firmly standing on bedrock may ultimately depend on people having made up some rules as they went along. Consider, for example, the U.S. Constitution. We regard it as the foundation on which our political order rests, but what is the ultimate chain of authority on which the constitution itself rests?

Following backwards the nearest thing we have to such a chain takes us to a concern in the first couple of years after the Revolutionary War among some Virginians, including most notably George Washington and James Madison, about the inability of existing political structures to foster commerce that affects more than one state.

The Virginians reached some agreements with counterparts in Maryland regarding commerce in their part of the new nation, but they realized the geographic scope would need to be wider. So the Virginia General Assembly passed a resolution in 1786 proposing a meeting of commissioners from all of the states "to consider how far a uniform system in their commercial regulations may be necessary to their common interest and their permanent harmony."

That led to the Annapolis Convention in September of the same year. Only five states, not even a majority, were represented at Annapolis.

Despite (and in another sense, because of) that meager representation, the Annapolis commissioners did not make any substantive constitutional recommendations but called for another convention to meet the following May in Philadelphia and to consider not just the regulation of commerce but any "further provisions" needed "to render the constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies of the Union."

In trying to justify this expansion from their original mandate, the Annapolis conferees pointedly noted that New Jersey had instructed its representatives to consider not just commercial regulations but also "other important matters." Even with that effort at a justification, the men at Annapolis knew they were stretching things in making their recommendation, as far as their formal authority was concerned. In their concluding report they wrote:

"If in expressing this wish, or in intimating any other sentiment, your Commissioners should seem to exceed the strict bounds of their appointment, they entertain a full confidence that a conduct dictated by an anxiety for the welfare of the United States will not fail to receive an indulgent construction."

The tenuousness of the chain of authority leading to the U.S. Constitution did not end there. The Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia was supposed to propose revisions to the Articles of Confederation, which by their own terms could be amended only with the unanimous agreement of the states.

The Virginia resolution and the report of the Annapolis Convention both explicitly mentioned unanimous approval as needed for any new arrangements. The writers of the new constitution nonetheless decided on their own that approval of only nine states would be necessary for their work to take effect.

The American constitutional experiment took root not because the new distribution of powers grew out of some previously established authorizing framework. It took root partly because of sheer necessity. It succeeded also because of a political culture bequeathed by the British whose rule had so

recently been shaken off.

The Founding Fathers were making up rules as they went along, but those rules and their implementation were based on something even more fundamental: habits of tolerance, accommodation and representation that were part of an Anglo-American culture that already was well established.

The makers of the new Egypt will necessarily be making up rules on the fly as well. What legitimacy the rule-making will have will be based on whatever ad hoc legitimizing mechanisms become available, such as the presidential election that Morsi won.

Whether Egypt achieves in the years ahead reasonable stability and something approaching democracy will not depend primarily on whether the president or the SCAF or anyone else has acted according to the letter of an interim constitution, which is Egypt's equivalent of the Articles of Confederation. Nor will it depend on whether a member of the Muslim Brotherhood holds high office.

It will depend largely on whether Egyptians can forge from foreign examples, colonial residue and their own accelerated political development the sort of habits and attitudes that make stability and democracy possible.

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Atomized America of Late Capitalism

America's late-stage capitalism, built upon the imagined glories of global empire and the deep deceptions of personalized propaganda, has created a nation that has lost touch with genuine human empathy, a place where mass shootings are weekly events and politics is shouting, observes Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

A couple of decades ago, upon returning to Atlanta, Georgia, after spending a year abroad, I would frequent an independent bookshop that contained a small coffee shop/cafe, where I would sip tea, read books and periodicals, and engage in the nearly extinct art of long form face-to-face verbal discourse with other habitués of the cafe. To this day, I have long standing friendships with a

number of people I came to know during those years.

Yet even then, I noticed how the atomization inherent to the internalization of the corporate state (the manner that the domination of commercial and work space had all but eliminated the public commons) had diminished so many people's ability to converse on all but the most superficial level.

Any invocation to deepen conversation or an assertion that arrived outside of the realm of status quo consensus caused all too many to simply go haywire. People checked out, went blank, testiness ensued. Comfort zones were mobilized for a siege. The space between people became a no man's land, stippled with a minefield of sensitivities.

In short, approaching life and one's fellows from a mode of mind evincing aspects of the human condition that existed outside the realm of workplace expediency and consumer desire had been diminished to the point of being rendered all but absent. People seemed adrift – bereft of the ability to cohabit public space. The will towards communal engagement had atrophied.

Essential qualities – traits that are uniquely human – had been lost. A wasteland of fragmented discourse and inarticulate rage howled between us.

And the situation has only degraded since that time. Unless communal space can be reclaimed and our innate humanity re-established, to paraphrase Kafka: There is infinite hope but not for us.

After decades of economic decline, the loss of public commons, the emotional blowback of the militarist brutality required to sustain empire and the effects of social atomization and mass media-borne insularity – the act of engaging in fruitful, democratic discourse, with all too many of the people of the U.S., without evoking angst, anger and a host of demented fantasies, has become increasingly unlikely.

“Awake we share the world; sleeping each turns to his private world.” –
Heraclitus

Exploitative social arrangements, throughout history, carry this circumstance in common: A citizenry too beaten down, harried, and/or prideful to recognize they have been swindled by a corrupt elite.

Due to an indifference to outright hostility towards gaining awareness as to what forces create their degraded situation, the swindle will penetrate the populace to the bone; will become part of its (social and individual) DNA. To

apprehend the reality of the situation would, seemingly, tear those afflicted asunder on a molecular level.

Once you have allowed the swindle to permeate your being – taking back your life must become the driving force of your existence. If you don't recapture the landscape of your own soul, then your life will be comprised of a dance with dust and ash.

Do not underestimate the power of the seeds of awakening that sleep within you. Yet, do not be naive in regard to the knowledge that, all too often, all too many will choose not to cultivate their potential for humanity, and thus will yield a bitter harvest of pettiness, spite, cupidity and cruelty.

At times, even in seemingly mundane moments, the air is plangent with a silent scream of terror. Yet, we go on, as if we hear nothing. We continue to make small talk. Wander to the refrigerator when not particularly hungry. Fumble for the TV remote. In reality, those are the times that try men's souls. And we are found wanting.

More often than not, the face of oppression is fronted by a facile smile and rewards you for your complicity by proffering piffling bribes.

The comfort zones of the checked-out, distracted, self-involved citizens of empire are perched upon a mountain of corpses. When the agendas of a culture are circumscribed to merely selfish agendas and empty appetites – compulsive materialism, militarist aggression, bigotry cloaked as religious conviction – the world seems to wend towards wasteland.

In such times, where can sanctuary be sought? Both within and by risking casting oneself towards the beating heart of the soul of life. Human beings contain deep reservoirs of empathy, a capacity for apprehending the sacred, and the ability to love. Deep wells of redemption pool beneath the wasteland. The human heart is a divining rod that helps one locate the source of the healing waters of life.

Recently, I was asked online: Where was God when seven human beings of the Sikhi faith were gunned down, on Aug. 5, in their place of worship in Oak Creek, Wisconsin? A more pertinent question might be – as long as one possesses a desire to make inquiries into the whereabouts of invisibles – where is the nation's collective humanity?

Will we continue to banish it by escape into distraction, denial and fantasy i.e., refusing to look deeply into ourselves and the social conditions and attendant mindsets that engender a perpetual reign of violence.

There was a god (metaphysically) present at the scene of this latest shooting

rampage. The God all too many Americans revere and look to for guidance: The God of Death.

Are the people of the U.S. at this stage of the entropic decline of late empire, even capable of the type of collective introspection necessary to come to an understanding that something is fundamentally wrong with our concept of culture?

The problem of evil is far from cut and dry: both good and evil are interwoven into the souls of every person on the planet. Any attempt to wholly decimate evil would destroy what is good within us as well.

The best we can do is to do our utmost to discern the evil dwelling within us on an individual basis, and moment by moment, attempt to channel our actions – by harnessing the cold, powerful, impersonal energies of evil – towards things that are warm, personal and life-enhancing. Such acts serve as an anti-evil repellent.

Conversely, viewing life as a struggle of good versus evil is intoxicating, and, like most intoxicants, can prove addictive. Yet the essence of a human being cannot be pigeonholed, cannot be limned by labeling; within each of us, dwell multiple and manifold legacies, familial and cultural, that have imprinted our character and serve as the progenitors of our actions.

Yet the notion of pure good and pure evil grip our imaginations; the image of yellow eyed, unguilate, and glowering Satan or beatified and risen Mary, Mother of God appeal to us because their existence promises to liberate us from the mundane, to deliver us from the mire of ambiguity, from our daily servitude to implacable necessity.

An open heart is a vulnerable heart. Therefore, some prefer to fortify themselves with a bristling bulwark of self-protective, nuance-evading prejudgments. A flight of hatred can serve to mitigate the uncertainty inherent to a commitment to love. An individual can limn their life with enmity's broad, thrashing brushstrokes – a Jackson Pollock drip/splatter of animus.

Propelling one past angst-inducing nuance and complexity, hate, masked as purity, can carry us. After a time, its monolithic shadow becomes inseparable from one's own. When one stabs at the perceived darkness of an enemy, one wounds oneself.

Confused, enveloped by one's own darkness, a person can come to believe the blow was delivered by a foe. Thus, all too often, one will hate what is different, seeing that difference as being a threat. In this way, irrational, self awareness-devoid hatred threatens all near it.

The machinations of Power have entered a new phase: a full-spectrum counterfeiting of the images of the soul that rise like a fever dream from the abysmal, group-mind of late-stage capitalism.

In this age, there is no need for thronging mobs, foisting banners and carrying blazing torches through the central squares of contemporary cities, as occurred in 1930s Germany and Italy, because every sofa has become a 24/7 Nuremberg Rally; every mass media device enables an instant immersion in the mob.

Führers and Generalissimos have been rendered obsolete, because we have little, virtual versions of the strutting breed on Reality Television; no need for serried ranks of jut-jawed brownshirts, when we have become storm troopers, ourselves, marching in a mindless parade of endless distraction. All as the sky burns and oceans seethe acidity.

The fact that so many U.S. citizens continue to believe that they inhabit a democratic nation, devoted to the concept of freedom of speech, of the press, and of free assembly reveals something very troubling: that the internalization of the tacit tenets of the corporatist state (a mutant strain of classic fascism) is now embedded so deeply in the collective psyche of the U.S. populace, and has rendered all too many with only a cursory, at best, understanding of what civil liberties involve.

Withal, it is not possible to grieve (or become outraged at) the loss of something one has no concept of ever having existed in the first place. How is it possible for one who has spent his entire lifetime in a windowless prison to know the grief experienced by fellow inmates who have known the beauty beheld when viewing the prismatic light of a dawning day?

Those who have encased themselves in a self-referential bubble of rationalization, by reflex, dismiss the assertion that complicity in an odious system (such as a blood-sustained, militarist empire) amounts to silent affirmation of the harm the system (although nebulous in nature) reaps. By doing so, they unwittingly exact punishment upon themselves.

Such unfortunate souls continue to exist. Yet to exist in such a manner, one must circumvent one's senses and blinker the life of the mind, thereby becoming like a caged wild animal that, as the years have passed, has forgotten what its true nature is, because its essential self has atrophied into mere mind-numbing subsistence.

What kind of a life is this, you may well ask? But you already know the answer: It is no life.

There exists one requisite trait needed to face evil: The knowledge of one's own

capacity for embodying the trait. Inseparable, treachery and redemption arrive together. The human heart, capable of both cruelty and kindness, provides the arena where one's better nature might gain the upper hand against one's destructive inclinations.

And this is precisely why I eschew being a "pragmatic" predator drone-apologist liberal or a purity-swooning conservative: A compulsion towards partisanship serves to censor the disorderly dialog of the heart, and thus compels one to remain locked within an ego-fortified structure of imprisoning platitudes and self-serving rationalizations.

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