

Entangled in Sunni-Shiite Wars

Early U.S. presidents warned against “entangling” foreign alliances, but they never suspected America might be drawn into squabbles between Sunnis and Shiites dating back to the Seventh Century succession of Prophet Muhammad. But that now seems to be the case, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Sometimes it seems that a major part of the U.S. role in the world is to assuage the anxieties, fears, and hurt feelings of other nations. Parents do this with children, and clinical psychologists do this with patients; should the world’s superpower be expected to do this with foreign states? Evidently it is.

This month, for example, there will be a summit meeting at Camp David with Gulf Arab states, and the purpose is summed up in the headline of a newspaper [article](#) about preparations for the meeting: the gathering is intended to “ease fears” of Arabs in connection with the agreement on limiting Iran’s nuclear program. Such U.S. hand-holding with putative allies in the Middle East is not limited to matters related to the Iranian nuclear deal, and such salving of feelings is not limited to the Middle East.

The question arises: why should we care about someone else’s apparent angst? And why should the United States devote any resources, including the scarce resource of its leaders’ time and attention, to doing something about it?

There are a couple of legitimate reasons it might make sense for the United States to be responsive to such foreign anxiety. One is that, if the foreign emotions are being expressed in the context of interests shared with the United States, such expression might be a useful indicator that something about the course of U.S. policy warrants rethinking.

Such rethinking is certainly better than the sort of dismissive unilateralism that has helped to get the United States in trouble in the past. But shared interest is not the context for much of the angst being expressed toward the United States, including the current feelings of the Gulf Arabs related to Iran. Those “fears”, as well as similar expressions from Israel, have to do mainly with intra-regional contests for influence, often with a sectarian or ethnic coloration, that do not involve interests the United States shares.

Another possible reason to be responsive is that unassuaged anxiety might lead the anxious foreign state to do something damaging to our own interests. A classic worry of this type is that an ally of ours might become so disaffected that it decides to become an ally of someone else instead. This type of worrying

is not necessarily good for international peace and stability, as some pre-World War I history demonstrated.

Anyway, that's not the kind of situation we have in the Middle East today. Those who say they are fearful of Iran are not going to become allies of Iran (although if they move toward tension-reducing rapprochement with Tehran, so much the better for peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region)

Or maybe a fear-ridden state might lash out, like a threatened animal, and do something more damaging and destructive than merely switching alliances. Amid those fears being voiced in the Middle East today, probably the most destructive such reaction one can think of would be Israel starting a war with Iran.

But the prospective nuclear agreement that supposedly is the basis of the fears would make such an attack less, not more, likely, because the attack would be all the more blatantly a destructive and unnecessary action.

Expressions of fear and anxiety will continue, and so will the presumed need for the United States to respond to them, for two basic reasons. One is that ostensibly fearful states have every reason to milk those emotions for all the arms sales, security guarantees, economic aid, and superpower attention they can get. Why wouldn't they, regardless of how sincere or insincere the emotions may be?

The other reason is that displeased allies constitute a convenient theme that domestic opponents can use to criticize foreign policy. Never mind that such criticism may be inconsistent, with some of the same folks wringing hands over professed nervousness among Gulf Arabs or Israel apparently not caring about what America's major European allies, who actually have been party to the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear agreement, feel about it. (Some of the same people dismissed the views of Old Europe at the time the Iraq War was launched.)

Foreign nations often have genuine and well-founded fears, and it behooves us to try hard to understand those fears. Such understanding does not come easily to Americans, whose situation of power and geographic separation is quite different from the more vulnerable circumstances that most nations have faced. But understanding of this type is much different from catering to whatever anxieties someone claims to have, and makes a claim on the United States to relieve.

Sometimes the best U.S. response would be a diplomatic version of, "Tough. Not our problem."

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