

More Incoherence in Syria Policy

Australia is the latest U.S. ally to join the bombing campaigns against Islamic State militants inside Syria, but the incoherence of the strategy is underscored by Washington's continuing refusal to negotiate seriously with the Syrian government about a realistic political settlement of the war, writes Greg Maybury.

By Greg Maybury

As expected, Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced a decision by the government to participate in airstrikes on ISIS strongholds inside Syria. But what was less expected was the decision, taken at the same Cabinet meeting and announced at the same press conference, to accept an additional 12,000 Syrian refugees, along with spending \$A44 million supplying 240,000 refugees with "cash, food, water and blankets" in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

The cost to Australia of accepting these additional refugees, almost doubling the projected intake for the year, has been estimated at around \$A700m over the next four years.

To be sure the decision to take in the extra refugees and provide additional humanitarian support was welcomed by most Australians, even many of those who hitherto might have been anti-immigration or opposed to such largesse on purely economic grounds, and it has bi-partisan support. The decision however to join the bombing fray may not be as enthusiastically received.

In response to Abbott's declaration, made presumably to justify the decision and offset anticipated criticism, that the legal basis for the air strikes is "the collective self-defense of Iraq," Independent MP Andrew Wilkie said dropping bombs on Syria would be "illegal, ineffective and dangerous". Regardless, Wilkie almost certainly will be echoing what is likely to be the reaction of a significant number of Australians once the reality of the decision takes root in the public consciousness, especially in the wake of the decision to accept the increased refugee intake.

Wilkie added the following: "These air strikes just won't work. You can't defeat an unconventional enemy like Islamic State by dropping bombs."

Even before Abbot's decision, in a recent article published in the Australian Financial Review, Geoff Winestock reported that neither the U.S. nor Australia can expect the end the war in Syria while they oppose both sides in the conflict. Now for many this might be a no-brainer, but Winestock's observations nonetheless bear repeating, since logic has never been highly prized much less

frequently invoked in either Washington's or Canberra's responses to the so-called "war on terror."

What makes Winestock's observations compelling is that he was reporting on his recent interview with Australian Jeremy Salt, author of the book The Unmaking of the Middle East – A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands. Salt is a former journalist turned academic, and is currently professor of politics at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.

Salt's view tendered a couple of days earlier is as pessimistic as it is unsettling. In commenting on the possibility that the Australian government, under the auspices of its relentlessly unquestioning alliance with the U.S., will join in the bombing of ISIS strongholds inside Syria's borders, he says, "the push by the Abbott government for bombing Islamic State might be a nice token of our commitment to U.S. alliance, but it is practically useless and could make Australians more of a target for terrorists."

Along with more broader considerations from other sources, we will return to Salt's summation of the situation shortly. But it should be noted that the refugee crisis is reaching levels not seen since Adolf Hitler blew his brains out in the Berlin Bunker at the end of World War Two. We are witnessing a perpetual motion catastrophe in the making that was inescapably underscored recently by the sight of a young Syrian refugee boy Aylan Kurdia's body washing up on a Turkish beach. Folks here in Australia and elsewhere are beginning to seriously question the "wisdom" of this nonsensical, unnecessary and pointless war.

As Ben Eltham from alternative Aussie news-site New Matilda reported, "What can explain the outpouring of grief and compassion that those photographs have provoked, except the extraordinary power of those images? Certainly we knew, or should have known, about the perils of refugee movement and the horror of the Syrian civil war. But somehow, perhaps understandably, it had been easy for too many to look away."

If there is any lasting good that might come from this little boy's tragic death, it may manifest itself not just in a more compassionate response both in Australia and elsewhere to the refugee crisis, clearly the single biggest catalyst underpinning the government's decision to substantially increase the refugee intake, but a greater awareness of the factors which have led us all to this point. For it is those factors that far too many folks found it easy to "look away" from. In reality, it could well be argued we have been doing that since America's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Although precipitated by the Arab Spring of 2011, the Syrian civil war is one

that had its genesis in the years leading up to 9/11. Like Iraq, Libya and Yemen, it is another recurrent exercise by America's neoconservatives and liberal interventionists in creating further mayhem and chaos in the Greater Middle East in the absence of any coherent, logical framework for doing so.

Australia's prime minister is, like most of his predecessors, ready, willing and able to do Uncle Sam's bidding regardless of the strategic logic, much less the morality or legitimacy under international law. Some time ago, he reinforced his own and probably the bulk of the Australian population's limited understanding of both the nature and the history of the conflict by describing the Syrian war as one being fought between the "baddies" and the "baddies."

It would appear that viewpoint remains in place. Abbott was roundly criticized for this comment not just for its lack of sophistication and over-simplification but as much for the contradiction and the ignorance inherent in the remark. It seems as far as Jeremy Salt is concerned, that "contradiction" is brought into sharp relief with the following question: "Who do you want to have in power in Syria? This is the question [that needs] to be asked in Canberra and Washington."

With the failed states of Iraq, Yemen and Libya providing us all with ample evidence, the refugee crisis alluded to earlier being Exhibit A in this respect, as to what happens when there is a power vacuum created by such interventions, this is a question that needs addressing urgently. In this Salt is emphatic: Australia and the U.S. must resolve this fundamental policy "contradiction" in relation to the Syrian war:

"On the one hand, we oppose Islamic State but in the other, we are equally determined to overthrow IS's arch-enemy, the government of Bashar al-Assad, which still rules more than half the country, including Damascus."

There is the inescapable consideration of what happens when we do get rid of these so-called despots, Gaddafi, Hussein, Mubarak, et.al. Almost as an understatement, Salt says that in his view he doesn't see "where America's national interest lies in destroying the government of Syria."

Of course, as we all know, Assad is presented as either the New Gaddafi or the New Hussein, the latest evil dictator incarnate who has to be removed from power. Yet we can also ask the following question: Assuming this is their endgame, who would the Americans prefer to negotiate with in terms of reaching some kind of resolution that reduces the violence, neutralizes the terrorist threat, and stems the tide of refugees, the Assad regime or ISIS?

The complicating factor since the outset of the Syrian conflict has been the

rise and rise of ISIS, which putting aside the reality that the “organization” is the blowback personified by America’s previous, well documented interventions in Iraq and Syria if not a direct creation of the Americans, has paradoxically prevented them from achieving what appears still to be the overarching goal: To get rid of Assad irrespective of the consequences.

It seems then the American foreign policy elites want to have their cake, and eat it at the same time. Despite the incoherence and absurdity of the policy agenda in Syria and the Greater Middle East, this “incoherence” and “absurdity” still fails to resonate with the architects and proponents of the policy.

All parties , the U.S., the U.K., Australia and others involved in the conflict , all keep crashing the same car, albeit into a different wall, hoping against hope that the next time it will be the wall that sustains the most damage.

For his part, in recent in-depth articles, Jonathan Marshall delivers a highly instructive “history lesson” on the background of this internecine conflict, along with showcasing its geopolitical implications and those of the global economic and social order. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”](#) and [“Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”](#)]

In Marshall’s view, the animus towards Syria is without doubt a legacy of George W. Bush’s administration, with [former Vice President Dick Cheney](#) and his acolytes having their grubby fingerprints all over it, an observation that will come as little surprise to many folks. And as Marshall rightly emphasizes, a proper, full understanding of the situation requires a depth and breadth of knowledge that goes back beyond the current president’s time in office.

This is not to absolve President Barack Obama from responsibility for the current situation and by any stretch. The U.S. Doctrine of Regime Change , in essence the very genesis of the Syrian crisis and that of the Middle East in general , has been “owned” by Obama now for over six years. And there is little indication that the neoconservative “regime change” strategy, which is the root cause of all these problems to say nothing of Ukraine and places in Latin America such as [Venezuela](#) and [Ecuador](#), will disappear from Obama’s foreign policy agenda anytime soon.

As Marshall rightly points out, the Obama administration should clearly renounce “regime change” as a policy, stop financial and military support going to ISIS and other militant groups, and begin acting in concert with Russia, Iran, the Gulf states and other regional powers to support unconditional peace negotiations with Assad’s regime.

He adds, "President Obama recently dropped hints that he welcomes further talks with Russia toward that end, in the face of prospects of an eventual jihadist takeover of Syria. Americans who value human rights and peace ahead of overthrowing Arab regimes should welcome such a new policy direction."

This, Marshall said, was not a simple case of "good-guy protesters vs. bad-guy government." The conflict was "more complicated than that," something that seems to have escaped all those stakeholders in Washington , and those in countries like Australia and the U.K , who are intent on removing Assad and his regime.

Marshall notes that nearly a quarter million people have perished and fully half of the country's inhabitants have been forced from their homes since the war began in 2011. This he says has created the "worst refugee crisis in the past quarter century" with the continuing advance of brutal Islamist factions making "the chances of restoring peace and human rights seem more remote than ever."

In his attempts to provide a greater measure of clarity , especially as to where the blame lies in respect of the current impasse , Marshall has the following to say: "Many parties are to blame, but certainly among them are interventionists in the United States and its allies who rationalized supporting the Islamist opposition, and refusing to embrace serious peace negotiations, on the grounds that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is a uniquely evil dictator. That image of Assad grew directly out of his regime's brutal response to civilian protests that began in early 2011, soon after the start of the Arab Spring."

Yet Marshall's analysis goes deeper, and leaves one wondering as to how this conflict could have gone on for as long as it did, if indeed Washington really wanted to resolve it. Along with pointing out the time-honored failure of the Western mainstream media (MSM) to objectively report on the tragic failures and wretched inadequacies of U.S. foreign policy , epitomized by the obsession with regime change , he has the following to say:

"In choosing to cite human rights selectively as their rationale for regime change, Western governments followed longstanding double standards. Many of the U.S-backed states involved in the anti-Assad campaign, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, have also committed gross human rights violations and war crimes, whether at home or in neighboring territories and states such as Gaza, Yemen and Lebanon."

As a final observation, one of the most unfortunate aspects of America's regime change recidivism has been the unwillingness or incapacity of even its staunchest allies to let U.S. officials know where they are going wrong, instead both blithely and blindly accepting whatever foreign policy "doctrine" happens to be in play at any given time despite the absence of strategic logic.

This behavior does little to discourage those neoconservatives and liberal interventionists. Regardless of Abbott's feeble justifications, the recent decision to "bomb, bomb, bomb" Syria by Australia is another example, if indeed it was required, that amply underscores this propensity.

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Israel Lobby Stops Iran's Help on Syria

Despite the worsening Mideast crisis, President Obama can't escape the tight policy constraints imposed by neocon thinking. The obvious move to work with Iran to save Syria from an Islamic State or Al Qaeda victory is blocked by the influence of the Israel lobby, writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

By the logic of geopolitics, the United States and Iran ought to be cooperating to contain and weaken the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Both countries have declared that the group is a very serious threat to their own security and to the security of the entire Middle East.

Indeed, it has become evident to all – besides those who are determined for their own reasons not to see it – that the Islamic State's intent on setting up an Islamic caliphate has the potential to dissolve the basic international order that has governed the Middle East for a century. So the logic of Iran-U.S. strategic cooperation against Daesh (as the group is referred to in Arabic) is no less compelling than was the logic of the Nixon administration in reaching an understanding with Maoist China to counter-balance their common Soviet adversary.

But that logical development isn't happening, contrary to the fears of some and hopes of others, and it isn't likely to happen any time soon, despite the nuclear agreement and the Obama administration's success in beating back the unprecedented campaign by the Israel lobby to defeat it. The reason is that it is not the logic of geopolitics, in the end, that is governing the problem.

It isn't the Iranian side of the equation that is failing to follow the geopolitical logic. Contrary to the constantly reiterated propaganda theme of the anti-Iran forces in the region and in the United States that Iran's ruling elite simply wants "death to America," Iran has publicly signaled to the Obama administration repeatedly that it was open to such cooperation. But the Obama administration has refused to reciprocate, for the simple reason that it is not

capable of formulating a regional policy on the basis of an objective analysis of strategic interests.

To understand the why the international politics of the Middle East are now so profoundly dysfunctional, one must begin with the contrasting modes of Iranian and American foreign policymaking. The dramatic differences between the two approaches to defining interests and policy toward the region has produced a fundamental mismatch between the U.S. and Iranian ways of responding to the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Middle East.

For Iran, geopolitics does indeed shape policy toward the region and the U.S. Iran, as a middle power that is vulnerable to threats from enemies in the region, cannot afford to base its policies on anything but a realistic appraisal of the threats and opportunities. Specifically, Iran has been facing explicit threats of attack from both Israel and the United States since the mid- to late-1990s. Now Daesh and Al Qaeda are on the offensive in Iraq and Syria, threatening the twin pillars of Iran's security strategy.

Under those circumstances, Iranian officials know that they must take advantage of any possible opening to improve relations with the United States. Iranian officials have made it clear that they are prepared to take advantage of any possibility even if slight of reaching an historic agreement with the United States that could lead to strategic understanding on the threat from Daesh.

One of the conceits of the U.S. political and national security elite is that the real power in the Islamic Republic is held by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard leadership, and that their interests lie in continuing hostility toward the United States. But that convenient belief is belied by Khamenei's own public position.

On April 9, Khamenei clearly articulated the view that Iran is ready to cooperate with the United States on regional issues if the U.S. would indicate some willingness to change its policy. In the context of the negotiations on the nuclear issue, Khamenei declared: "If the counterpart stops its bad behavior, one could expand this experience to other issues, but if the counterpart continues its bad behavior, it would only reinforce our experiences of the past and distrust in the United States."

Iran has made it clear that it is prepared to think creatively and flexibly about a *modus vivendi* with the United States. Last December, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, recognized that the United States was unlikely to cooperate explicitly with Iran, because of its continued support for Israel. But he suggested that a change in U.S. policy toward Israel was "not impossible" and then raised the possibility of something less than

explicit cooperation.

“The two can behave in a way that they do not use their energy against each other,” he said, and he called the nuclear agreement “crucial in this regard.”

In the final round of negotiations on the nuclear agreement from late June to mid-July, Iranian officials in Vienna confirmed to me that Iran and the United States had not discussed regional issues during the nearly 18 months of negotiations. But senior Iranian officials were still holding out some hope, however slight, that the Obama administration might soften its hostility toward Iran sufficiently to make at least tacit cooperation possible once the agreement was reached and approved by Congress.

The Iranians were basing their hope on an analysis of the objective situation in the region. One official told me on July 2: “The United States doesn’t have any reason to trust its allies in regard to Daesh.” He was alluding to the well-established fact that major funding for the terrorist organization had come from Gulf Sunni regimes and that they were clearly more interested in taking down the Assad regime than in stopping Daesh. But the same official also said: “Some in the United States may see Daesh as a source of pressure on the Syrian regime.”

But while Iran acknowledges the need for a change in U.S.-Iran relations to ease regional security threats, the United States has not made a move toward any such acknowledgment. U.S. policy toward the Middle East has long been defined primarily not by threats originating in the region but by much more potent domestic political interests, both electoral and bureaucratic.

The power of the Israel lobby in Washington, primarily but not exclusively over Congress, is well known, and that has imposed a rigid political and legal framework of hostility toward Iran on the U.S. government for two decades, beginning with a complete trade embargo that remains in place and creates major obstacles to any shift in policy.

What is seldom acknowledged, however, is that the interests of the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Agency have become tightly intertwined with those of the anti-Iran coalition in the Middle East. A set of mutually reinforcing bureaucratic interests now binds U.S. policy to an alliance structure and military and intelligence programs in the Middle East that have come to replace objective analysis of regional realities in determining U.S. policy.

The first is the imperative for the U.S. military of holding on to U.S. air, naval and land bases in the region, all but one of which are located in states that are part of the anti-Iran coalition. Continuing long-term control of those bases is the coin of the realm for U.S. military institutions that trumps

possible competing policy concerns.

Similarly, arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf sheikhdoms and Israel are a primary interest of the Pentagon, its arms contractor partners and its congressional allies. And the determination of that same set of domestic interests to continue the bonanza or research-and-development spending on a missile defense system requires a continued identification of Iran as primary regional adversary and threat.

Finally, the U.S. national security state has never given up its ambition to regain primary influence in Iraq, despite the political legacy of the Iraq War and a Shia-dominated regime in the country. That quite unrealistic interest reduces still further the space for any cooperation with Iran in the region.

The interaction of all those dynamics leaves the Obama administration in a position where it cannot adopt a real Middle East strategy that reflects the gravity of the current situation. The paradoxical result is that, instead of responding to the regional crisis by applying creative diplomacy involving an opening to Iran, the Obama administration is reduced to maneuvering within the tight constraints imposed by the dominant political interests in cleaving to the status quo.

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<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/why-us-and-iran-aren-t-cooperating-against-daesh-2143749800#sthash.mItYS0za.dpuf>
