

In Iraq and Syria, A Vietnam-type Quagmire Over Oil and Gas?

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"The Pottery Barn rule: You break it, you own it." Colin Powell (1937-), George W. Bush's [Secretary of State](#), (2001-2004) when he warned [President George W. Bush](#) in the summer of 2002 of the consequences of military action in [Iraq](#), (quoted in *Plan of Attack*, 2004, by journalist [Bob Woodward](#)).

[The secret involvement of the United States in arming the Islamist Mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan] "was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan. ...The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President [Jimmy] Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire." Zbigniew Brzezinski (1928-), national security advisor to [President Jimmy Carter](#) from 1977 to 1981 and one of President Barack [Obama](#)'s main advisors on foreign policies, (interview of January 15, 1998, by Le Nouvel Observateur, Paris).

"The use of force is only legal [internationally] when it is in self-defense [against an armed attack] or with a [formal] U.N. Security Council authorization." Ban Ki-Moon (1944-), United Nations Secretary General, (2013)

If the political and military situation in the oil-rich Middle East appears to be most chaotic, most complex and most confused, it's because it is. How could it be otherwise when there are twenty-some governments jockeying for power and influence over there, trying to put their hands on the oil and gas faucets and they have no scruples about getting directly involved in the affairs of each other to reach their goals. Indeed, there is no part of the world where foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of other nations by a host of governments is so prevalent and is even taken for granted.

At the top of the list of outside interventionists, we find the well armed United States of America with its military gear spread all over the world. In March 2003, the Bush-Cheney administration, assisted by the U.K. Tony Blair government and pushed by the Israeli government, used false pretenses and outright lies, and opened a [Pandora's Box of woes](#) in that part of the world by militarily invading the country of Iraq. It did it to overthrow Iraq's Sunni-controlled government and replaced it with a Shiite-controlled government. This invasion has since destabilized the entire Middle East by rekindling the dormant Sunni-Shiite antagonism, and it has put into motion a series of civil wars and a series of proxy wars in many countries of the region, mainly along the politico-religious lines of Sunni populations vs. Shiite populations, but also along ethnic and tribal loyalties.

In 2011, the U.S. Obama administration thought it could safely withdraw American troops from a **devastated Iraq** and wash its hands of the entire mess. —Well, it did not turn out that way. The current insurgency of Sunni Muslims both in Syria and in Iraq is a fall-out from the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The ongoing civil war in Syria has been a fertile ground for disenchanting Sunnis to form an **Islamic State militia (IS)**, [also known as the **Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)**]. Their aim is to carve up a large chunk of land out of Syria and Iraq that they call an Islamic caliphate to underline the links between politics and religion in that part of the world.

After having left behind a country governed by a sectarian Iraqi Shiite government in December 2011, the Obama administration has very limited options to counter the rise of the most barbaric IS militia in that part of the world. For domestic political reasons, however, Mr. Obama must go into the motion of waging war in the Middle East. (There could be a more logical reason why Obama wants to bomb Syria, as explained below).

On September 10 (2014), President Obama announced that his administration stands ready to send hundreds of American military “advisors” back to Iraq and to intensify the campaign of airstrikes against the Islamic State militia (IS), both inside Iraq and inside Syria, with the assistance of some other governments that are expected to provide ground troops to occupy any territory “liberated” from the IS organization.

Such a strategy raises a few fundamental questions.

First, there is a legal question. How can the United States government say openly that it intends to violate Syria’s airspace to attack the IS jihadists without either a formal agreement with the Bashar al-Assad Syrian government and/or without a supportive resolution of the United Nations Security Council?

Secondly, there is the feasibility of a military ground operation in Iraq and in Syria when the three most directly involved governments in the region, i.e. the Assad Syrian government, the Sunni Turkish government and the Shiite Iranian government are not participants in the operation.

Considering that many countries in the Middle East have complicated interests, their direct military involvement in Syria is questionable, ... unless the true objective of the Obama operation is to complete the overthrow of the Assad regime in Damascus. In which case, the IS organization would only be serving as a convenient pretext for another more important purpose, i.e. the overthrow of the Syrian Assad government.

The organization IS (or some **other manipulating power** behind it) deliberately provoked American media and American conscience with well-staged barbaric beheadings. Keep in mind that in September 2013, Syrian rebel groups had staged a **false flag operation** by using chemical weapons against civilians in order to provoke an American response. This time, one year later, they seem to have succeeded.

Indeed, what are the ultimate political and military objectives in Syria? Does the U.S. State Department still want to topple the Assad government? If yes, why? What has the Syrian government done to the United States? And, if it is overthrown, who will take its place?

This would be a most curious “strategy” indeed if the U.S. were to fight both the Islamic State militia IS and the secular Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, and end up creating a political vacuum like the one the same policy created in Libya. Politics does not support a vacuum of power. In a country where 60 per cent of the population is Sunni, compared with only 20 per cent in Iraq, the likely successor to an Assad government in Syria would be a sectarian Sunni-controlled Islamist government, whether it be called IS or any other name. It could also become a complete mess as it is today in Libya, where different armed factions are fighting each other to grab some political foothold.

Who would then benefit? This can be ascertained if we rely on some economic analysis. Indeed, let us consider the all-important [geopolitics of proposed gas pipelines](#) in the Middle East. Such pipelines are planned to go from the Persian Gulf to Europe in order to diversify and reduce European energy dependence upon Russian gas.

Two main pipeline routes have been considered in recent years to bring natural gas to an energy-starved Europe that is in a more or less open conflict with Russia and which would like to find alternative gas supplies to balance out the Russian dominance of its markets:

-First, there is what has been dubbed the “Islamic pipeline”, (also called the “Friendship Pipeline” by the governments involved), because it is a proposed 3480 mile-long [Iran-Iraq-Syria natural gas pipeline](#) going toward Europe from east to west, from Iran and Iraq to the Mediterranean coast of Syria and Lebanon.

-Secondly, there is an alternative pipeline to supply natural gas to Europe and it is the [Qatar-Turkey pipeline](#) which would take a more northbound route and would go from [Qatar](#) (the world’s leading exporter of liquefied natural gas) and Saudi Arabia via Syria to [Turkey](#), where it would connect with the [Nabucco pipeline](#) originating from the Caspian Sea to supply European customers through Austria, as well as gas-starved Turkey.

This later pipeline is supported by many European states and by the United States, and by Israel who would benefit with a connected pipeline. Therefore, [many countries’ involvement](#) in the [Syrian civil war](#) is based in part on their desire to see the building of that gas pipeline from [Qatar](#) to [Turkey](#) through Syria.

However, the [Syrian government](#) has rejected this later proposal, preferring the first option. That is why the country of Syria is at the center of decisions regarding the building of pipelines to bring natural gas to Europe. This is also an important source of political conflict in that part of the world. It explains why the governments of [Qatar](#), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and the European Union (EU) have worked so hard to overthrow the Syrian Assad government and have financed various rebel groups, including the IS organization.

Conclusion

Oil and gas production, pipeline building and sales are important factors in explaining the political frictions present in the Middle East and the reason why so many governments want to topple the Assad Syrian government. Such an overt or camouflaged policy will only bring more chaos to the Middle East.

To bring peace to the Middle East would require a spirit of compromise and concessions, and serious political negotiations, not decades-long wars. A negotiated political solution would seem preferable to constant military confrontations, especially considering the carnage that

wars bring to the people.

The sooner this is recognized, the better for all those involved.

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