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Any Solution to Syria?

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SHOULD the U.S. intervene to stop the bloodshed in Syria? I find myself torn between four different perspectives — from New Delhi, Baghdad, Tel Aviv and the U.N.

Last week, I met with a group of Indian strategists here at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses to talk about how America should withdraw from Afghanistan and navigate the interests of India, Pakistan and Iran. At one point, I tossed out an idea to which one of the Indian analysts responded: That was tried before — “in the 11th century.” It didn’t work out well. That’s why I like coming to Delhi to talk about the region. Indian officials tend to think in centuries, not months, and they look at the map of the Middle East without any of the British-drawn colonial borders. Instead, they only see old civilizations (Persia, Turkey, Egypt), old faiths (Shiites, Sunnis and Hindus), and old peoples (Pashtuns, Tajiks, Jews and Arabs) — all interacting within long-set patterns of behavior.

“If you want to understand this region, just take out a map from the Ganges to the Nile and remove the British lines,” remarked M. J. Akbar, the veteran Indian Muslim journalist and author. It takes you back to the true undercurrents of history that have long ruled the Middle East “and to interests defined by people and tribes and not just governments.”

When you look at the region this way, what do you see? First, you see that there is no way the U.S. can keep Afghanistan stable after we draw down — without working with Iran. Because of the age-old ties between Iranian Shiites and the Shiite Persian-speaking Afghans of Herat, Afghanistan’s third-largest city, Iran always was and always will be a player in Afghan politics. Shiite Iran has never liked the Sunni Taliban. “Iran is the natural counter to Sunni extremism,” said Akbar. It’s in Iran’s interest to “diminish the Taliban.” That’s why America and Iran were tacit allies in unseating the Taliban, and they will be tacit allies in preventing the reseating of the Taliban.

So from India, the struggle in Syria looks like just another chapter in the long-running Sunni-Shiite civil war. Syria is a proxy war between Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Qatar — two monarchies funding the Syrian “democrats,” who are largely Syrian Sunnis — and Shiite Iran and the Shiite-Alawite Syrian regime. It’s a war that never ends; it can only be suppressed.

Which is why in Israel some Israeli generals are starting to realize that if Syria is a fight to the death it could pose as great a strategic threat to Israel as Iran’s nuclear program. If Syria disintegrates into another Afghanistan — on Israel’s border — it would be an untamed land, with jihadists, chemical weapons and surface-to-air missiles all freely floating about.

Can that collapse be avoided? From Washington, some hoped that by quickly toppling the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, the West and the Sunnis could “flip” Syria from the Iranian-Soviet orbit to the Sunni-Saudi-American orbit. I’m dubious. I doubt that Syria can be flipped in one piece; it will break apart in the air into Sunni and Alawite regions. And, if we did manage to flip Syria, Iran would try to “flip” predominantly Shiite Iraq and Bahrain into its camp.

Some Arab diplomats at the U.N. argue, though, that there is a middle way, but it would require the U.S. to lead: First, mobilize the Security Council to pass a resolution calling for the creation of a transitional government in Syria with “full powers” and with equal representation of Alawites and Sunni rebels. If the Russians could be persuaded to back such a resolution (not easy), it could break the stalemate inside Syria, because many regime loyalists would see the writing on the wall and abandon Assad. The stick would be to tell the Russians that if they don’t back such a resolution, the U.S. would start sending weapons to the secular/moderate rebels.

Can there really be such a policy between George W. Bush’s “all-in” approach to transforming Iraq and Barack Obama’s “you-touch-it-you-own-it-so-don’t-even-touch-it” approach to Syria? One should study Iraq. The lesson of Iraq is that deep historical currents were at play there — Sunnis versus Shiites and Kurds versus Arabs. The December 2010 Iraqi elections demonstrated, though, that multisectarian parties and democratic rule were possible in Iraq — and actually the first choice of most Iraqis. But America would have had to keep some troops there for another decade to see that shift from sectarianism to multisectarianism become even remotely self-sustaining. Syria is Iraq’s twin. The only way you’ll get a multisectarian transition there is with a U.N. resolution backed by Russia and backed by a well-armed referee on the ground to cajole, hammer and induce the parties to live together.

It’s the Middle East, Jake.

If you will the ends, you'd better will the means. You can't change the politics "unless you say you'll stay for a hundred years," insists Akbar. But no one wants to play empire anymore. In which case, he argues, it's always best not to stay long in any of these countries — five months, not five years. Five years, says Akbar, is just long enough for people to hate you, but not fear or respect you, let alone change their long-held ways.