

Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria – America’s foreign policy has a dangerous and counterproductive love affair with exiles.

The two major US military actions of the last 15 years – the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – were informed and spurred on by the voices of exiles writes [Adam Weinstein](#). He warns that while listening to such exiles may be attractive to administrations in Washington DC, they should consider that the information they give may be inaccurate, and that exiles may not prove to be a positive force in their home countries after US military action has ended.



The American author John Steinbeck once said “you know how advice is...you only want it if it agrees with what you wanted to do anyway.” This encapsulates the history of US and other Western foreign policy leaders taking bad advice from exiles who are out of touch with their homeland. In fact, when it comes to foreign policy there is nothing US politicians love more than a good exile. But what makes an exile ‘good’ from a foreign policy perspective? Well, they should be from the ethnic/religious majority of their birth country, charismatic, preferably Western educated, and most importantly they should follow Steinbeck’s advice about advice and be a yes-man—or woman.

On February 13, Republican presidential candidates [debated](#) over whether the Iraq War was a mistake. Donald Trump accused President George W. Bush of refusing to kill Osama bin Laden despite advice from the CIA and then using the tragedy of 9/11 along with false reports of weapons of mass destruction as a pretext for invading Iraq. Governor John Kasich quickly came to Bush’s defence, noting that he had acted on the advice of then Secretary of State Colin Powell who he described as “one of the most distinguished generals in modern times.”

Perhaps, the most influential support for the invasion of Iraq did not come from a US official but rather from the late Iraqi exile [Ahmed Chalabi](#). He had a perfect resume for the job of White House exile-adviser on Iraq. He was from a well-known Shiite family—the majority sect in Iraq—educated at the prestigious University of Chicago, spent much of his life between the UK and US, and advised the White House to do what they already intended to do, invade Iraq. Chalabi falsely informed the White House that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction which became the primary public justification for an invasion. Like most exiles, upon return to Iraq he achieved meagre political success, eventually supporting the anti-US cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and was later scapegoated by the US after it became apparent that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The White House got one thing right when it chose to listen to Chalabi: Shiites while oppressed under Saddam Hussein were bound to become the ruling elite upon his departure. It’s just that Chalabi gave the wrong advice for all the wrong reasons. The trouble with listening to exiled elites is that desperation begets delusion.



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In Afghanistan a similar story unfolded with [Hamid Karzai](#) as the protagonist. Shortly after the US-led invasion a meeting was convened in Bonn, Germany between US diplomats, representatives from four anti-Taliban groups—most notably the Northern Alliance—and a special representative of the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. Very few of the most influential participants in that meeting flew in from Afghanistan because many were exiles of the Taliban era. The ethnic Pashtun and Indian-educated Hamid Karzai was an exile living in Quetta, Pakistan at the time of 9/11. Once it appeared a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan was imminent he travelled to Uruzgan Province to prove his value in fighting the Taliban and did manage to temporarily rout them from the province. After the Bonn Agreement he became president of the Interim Administration and ultimately served as Afghanistan's president until 2014. Under his leadership there were promises of a Taliban-free Afghanistan but instead what followed was an era of corruption, terrorism in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as a resurgence of the briefly incapacitated Taliban. Despite hailing from the prominent Popalzai tribe of the Pashtuns he never managed to consolidate Kabul's power in the tribal-dominated areas of southern Afghanistan. Now that the strength of the Taliban can no longer be denied, Kabul and the Taliban are set to begin direct [peace talks](#) in Islamabad, Pakistan, a plan approved by the US military.

One of the great falsehoods of exile king-making by the West is the idea that ethnicity, religious background, or family name alone can garner the legitimacy required to effectively rule a country. Of course, not all exiles lack legitimacy back home and some have even led revolutions. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini effectively led the Islamic Revolution in Iran first from Iraq in the mid-1960s, and later Paris from 1978, all while US officials refused to acknowledge his significance and support base. However, he led this revolution as an exile without the assistance of foreign powers and even against their wishes. Exiles who truly have credibility within the political system of their homeland or among their people do not require foreign backing nor do they necessarily adhere to foreign guidance. As the US continues to debate different outcomes for the crisis in Syria it should not only listen to Syrian voices that are sympathetic to US policy goals. Most importantly, it must be very careful about which Syrian voices it chooses to take advice from, especially if those voices are located outside of Syria.

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