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Could US-Syrian Strategies lead to Genocide?

Rocked by ongoing violence and protests in the Middle East and the tragic death of Ambassador Stevens in Libya, U.S. policy toward the region seems in crisis. Senator John McCain has characterized our Middle East foreign policy as “feckless,” while others have questioned why there appears to be widespread mistrust of U.S. intentions in the region. Syria represents a particularly difficult challenge for U.S. geopolitical strategists as the civil war rages on, with instability and the mounting deaths and displacement of innocent civilians spilling over to neighboring states. Is it possible that the current thrust of U.S. policy towards Syria may lead to a frightening genocide there, in part because of the real absence of critical geopolitical thinking about Syria’s culture and territory?

As the Arab Spring unfolded in 2011, the U.S. shifted away from its long-standing policy of overt and tacit support for many of the region’s dictators and strongmen. It embraced what it saw as change from below that could spur the development of a more inclusive democratic political system. Critics argued that this policy shift was simply one of convenience and pragmatism, given the ouster and/or death of long-time leaders from Tunisia to Egypt. As the Syrian revolution took flame in the streets of Aleppo, Damascus, and Homs aiming to topple the al-Assad regime, the U.S. lent its support to the Syrian rebels hoping to facilitate the downfall of the Ba’ath government. This, in turn, could shift the balance of power in the region, ostensibly to the detriment of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Herein lies the dilemma for U.S. geopolitical strategy: trying to accommodate Syria’s cultural realities while supporting the ouster of President al-Assad. Political, military, and economic power since the 1960s rests with the minority Alawi, who number less than two million or about 12 percent of the country’s population. Although considered a Shi’a sect, the Alawi religious doctrine deviates significantly from mainstream Shi’a beliefs and the dominant Sunni have long viewed the Alawi with distain. Under French occupation in the early 20th century, the Alawi were given significant autonomy over territory in western Syria along the Mediterranean coast, known as the Alawite State. Today, the Alawi can be found also on the plains around Homs and Hama, with significant concentrations in Aleppo and Damascus.

The geopolitical options for U.S. policy toward Syria seem to put the U.S. in a no-win situation. If the U.S. continues to support the predominantly Sunni Syrian rebels, either a mass exodus of Alawis or revenge killings leading to potential genocide are likely. Alawi Syrians have been viewed by Sunnis as religious heretics and enemies for centuries, and old hatreds die hard as witnessed in Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere around the world.

A divide-and-conquer approach to the region, perhaps hopeful of encouraging greater Sunni anger towards Iranian Shiites, likely would misfire and provoke more regional sectarian violence. Indeed, cynics argue that the U.S. only courts the region’s Sunni leaders because of oil and petrodollars and is more concerned about political-economic stability than democracy.

Nonetheless, perhaps the only viable solution to the Syrian crisis is the Balkan model, with the partition of Syria to establish an Alawi homeland in the traditional western territory known as Latakia. Whatever path is chosen, Syrian innocents will continue to die in ever-increasing numbers unless the U.S. and international community provide a viable geopolitical option acceptable to both sides. An Alawi genocide would set back U.S. interests in the Middle East for decades and further destabilize an already fragile region.

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