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Speaking truth to impotence in the Middle East

By Spengler

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It's hard to imagine an unhappier man than Barack Obama's aide Benjamin Rhodes, whose "anguish" is the subject of a March 15 New York Times profile. What keeps the 35-year-old Deputy National Security Advisor up nights is the 70,000 casualties in two years of civil war in Syria, and the likelihood that whatever the United States does to help the Syrian opposition will leave more people dead.

Rhodes came to Washington with a rescue fantasy about the Muslim world and a sentimental obsession that the job of American foreign policy was to protect civilians from harm.

America is now impotent in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe that is spreading from Syria to Iraq and Lebanon. The idealists of the present administration and its predecessor are the proximate cause of the bloodshed.

Rhodes, who drafted Obama's 2009 Cairo address, is the President's alter ego on Muslim matters, according to the Times account. "Drawing on personal ties and a philosophical kinship with Mr. Obama that go back to the 2008 campaign, Mr. Rhodes helped prod his boss to take a more activist policy toward Egypt and Libya when those countries erupted in 2011," wrote reporter Mark Landler. "Mr Rhodes, his friends and colleagues said, is deeply frustrated by a policy that is not working, and has become a strong advocate for more aggressive efforts to support the Syrian opposition." Landler adds:

Normally, the anguish of a White House deputy would matter little to the direction of American foreign policy. But Mr Rhodes has had a knack for making himself felt, not just in the way the president expresses his policies but in how he formulates them. Two years ago, when protesters thronged Tahrir Square in Cairo, Mr Rhodes urged Mr Obama to withdraw three decades of American support for President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. A few months later, Mr Rhodes was among those agitating for the president to back a NATO military intervention in Libya to head off a slaughter by Col Muammar el-Qaddafi.

Syria's Sunni majority started an insurgency against the minority Alawite government of Bashar al-Assad in response to the ill-named Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa. America's abrupt dismissal of its long-ally Hosni Mubarak and the ascendancy of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood emboldened Syria's long-suffering Sunni majority to stake its claim to power. Like Mubarak, the Assads suppressed the Muslim Brothers, but far more viciously, leveling the Sunni town of Hama in 1982 with casualties estimated at between 20,000 and 40,000.

Western policy thus provoked Syria's civil war. The prospect of a Sunni fundamentalist regime in Egypt under American patronage, the emergence of the "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq during the Petraeus "surge", and the victory of Western-backed Sunni jihadists over Libya's Gaddafi, gave Syria's Sunnis little choice. America's fecklessness with respect to Iran's nuclear ambitions, moreover, gave Saudi Arabia and Turkey strategic reasons to fund and arm various branches of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood.

In this tightly scripted tragedy, America's blundering provided the impetus for each step, except, of course, for the blundering of the European Union. The Europeans forced Assad to undertake agricultural reforms among the conditions for a new trade treaty, forcing tens of thousands of small farmers off their land in the Sunni Northeast of the country, into tent cities around Damascus.

Iran responded to the Sunni insurgency in the obvious way, by sending Revolutionary Guard regulars as well as its Lebanese-based Hezbollah auxiliaries into Syria to fight for its ally, the Assad regime. Iran's involvement prevents the loosely organized insurgent coalition from toppling a minority regime.

The depleted ranks of the regular Syrian army will be replenished with Iranian soldiers or surrogates. The Alawite regime will continue to commit atrocities in order to convince its own base as well as the Syria's Christian, Kurdish and Druze minorities that they must fight to the death because Sunni vengeance would be horrible. Saudi Arabia will continue to filter jihadists and weapons into Syria and Turkey will continue to provide logistical support.

It is a matter of simple logic that countries composed of potentially warring ethnic and sectarian constituencies can only be stable under minority rule. Majority rule would threaten the existence of minorities and give them cause to fight to the death. That is why the Ba'ath party of Syria (founded by the Christian Michel Aflaq) ruled through the Alawite minority with Christian support, while the Ba'ath party of Iraq ruled through the Sunni minority with Christian support, including Saddam Hussein's deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz. In both cases, the Christians supported a minority regime that would be more likely to tolerate minorities.

The correct American policy response to the unraveling of the Arab world was to neutralize Iran, specifically, destroying its capacity to make nuclear weapons and reducing the Revolutionary Guards. With Iran de-fanged, the Syrian conflict would have burned itself out by now.

Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah fighters would not have reinforced the Assad regime, and the Saudis and Turks would not have sponsored Sunni insurgents. Life in Egypt and Syria would have been miserable, even violent, but the violence would have remained localized. It was time for Mubarak to go, but America might have smoothed the transition in cooperation with the military and the small minority of demographic reformers.

It should not be a controversial statement that Arab civilization is at existential risks. Countries that cannot feed themselves, like Egypt and Syria, are at extreme risk by definition. But there is a huge difference between a gradual, manageable decline and an eruption of violence where the fighters on both sides believe that they have nothing to lose by fighting to the bitter end. With craft and foresight, America might have achieved the former; it has provoked the latter by piling error atop error.

American blunders through two administrations have set a regional Sunni-Shi'ite war in motion that the utopians in Washington are powerless to prevent. Young Mr Rhodes, who crafted the "responsibility to protect" rubric under which American intervened against Gaddafi, can do nothing to protect the millions of Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis and others who will be drawn into the maelstrom. The resignation last month of the National Security Council's human rights chief, the anti-genocide campaigner Samantha Power, might be an omen: the bungling do-gooders may not want to stick around to see the consequences of their mistakes.

From the Republican side, the ill omen came from the Conservative Political Action Committee retreat last week in Maryland, where the Kentucky isolationist Senator Rand Paul won the straw poll for the next Republican presidential nomination. Paul and his constituents want no foreign policy at all. That, in effect, is what we have at the Obama White House. It may turn into a bi-partisan consensus.

The liberal interventionists of the Obama administration may have set in motion one of history's biggest humanitarian catastrophes, while the hawkish interventionists of the Republican party may have persuaded American voters to switch off the world news for a generation.