

EDITORIAL: Hold fast to our true friends in the Middle East



In this April 13, 2015 photo released by U.S. Navy Media Content Services, helicopters fly from the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt during a vertical replenishment with the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson in the Gulf of Oman. The U.S. Navy has dispatched USS Theodore Roosevelt toward the waters off Yemen to join other American ships prepared to intercept any Iranian vessels carrying weapons to Houthi rebels, U.S. officials said.

U.S. NAVY MEDIA CONTENT SERVICES VIAAP — Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Scott Fenaroli

U.S. Navy warships are shadowing Iranian boats so they don't deliver weapons to rebels in Yemen. The Obama administration is trying to complete a deal to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Clearly, Iran and the United States are enemies — except Iran-backed militias are fighting Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia is leading the coalition that is bombing the Houthi rebels in Yemen with our support. The oil kingdom is a longtime U.S. ally — yet it supports clerics whose extreme teachings encourage terrorists around the world, and 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi citizens.

In Iraq, Shia fighters with American blood on their hands are helping the Baghdad government fight the Islamic State's Sunni militants. But in 2006, U.S. troops fought alongside Sunni insurgents who helped turn the tide of the war.

In Syria, we want to depose dictator Bashar Assad, but we didn't mind when his forces bombed Islamic State fighters.

Got that all straight?

It's not breaking news that the Middle East is a mess. But with overlapping civil wars in Iraq and Syria, the rise of the Islamic State and now the proxy war in Yemen, the shifting political and military alliances are enough to make you throw up your hands in disgust.

It's no wonder that some Americans want us to get out of the Middle East entirely.

But we shouldn't. If the United States completely retreated, the region would only get more violent and more innocent civilians would be killed and forced to flee. And when the United States was inevitably forced to get involved again, the task would be that much tougher.

That's why it's important that our diplomats focus on the region so that we don't have to send in troops again. As best we can, we have to learn the hard lessons of two post-9/11 wars that killed more than 6,800 Americans and did little to resolve longstanding sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Historically, the United States has been aligned with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers. The objective of the moment, however, is to defeat the Islamic State, the brutal Sunni-dominated terrorist group.

Nowhere else in the world does the ancient proverb that the enemy of my enemy is my friend become more of a strategy. Some analysts have tried to come up with charts to keep track of the complicated relationships, but they're virtually incomprehensible.

Israel is our closest ally in the Middle East by far, and yet President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are at odds over the Iran nuclear deal and Israeli settlements sidetracking a peace deal with the Palestinians.

In this volatile region, though, whatever the disagreements at the moment with Israel, we need to hold fast to our true friends.

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