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# U.S. policy has exacerbated crises in Middle East

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Self-serving actions often come back to haunt us — particularly in economic, political and environmental affairs. That was a common theme during my recent time in Europe. The issue was the links between the longtime neo-imperialism of the United States, Britain and France in the Middle East, climate disruption, and the violence committed by Islamic terrorists.

Tensions and conflicts have long existed in the Middle East. Their origins are not of our making.

But many people I spoke with said that over the past half century, Western nations made things far worse by propping up authoritarian governments, including the royal family of Saudi Arabia, to ensure continued access to their oil.

One result is that we burned a tremendous amount of oil from the Middle East. The emissions generated by burning oil are, of course, a primary cause of climate disruption.

I continually heard how the Saudi royalty, with Western political and military support, enriched themselves while stifling social and economic development as well as democratic participation for the masses. Many, especially the young, have been left feeling hopeless.

To ensure their own security, the Saudi elite supported mullahs who promote Wahhabism, a messianic, ultra-puritanical form of Islam that can attract malcontents looking for a purpose in life.

This has spawned hundreds of extremist religious TV stations, newspapers, and social media sites. One of their goals is to convince people to live out an imaginary apocalyptic showdown between good and evil by killing people deemed to be disbelievers. This includes other Muslims as well as Westerners.

Then, under the Bush administration, the United States invaded Iraq, in large part to ensure continued access to Iraq's oil, as Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, essentially acknowledged.

The invasion and its aftermath reopened long-standing rifts between the majority Sunni and minority Shiite populations. Between 150,000 to 500,000 innocent Iraqis died. Over and over I heard that these actions angered people throughout the Middle East and made it easier to recruit jihadists.

When the Islamic State emerged as a threat we bombed its strongholds, which again had the unintended side effect of killing innocent people. The recent murders by Islamic extremists in Paris and in San Bernardino, Calif., have precipitated more bombing, which might be necessary but risks the same outcome. Every time Western nations kill an innocent person in the Middle East, more jihadists are born.

Climate disruption, driven in part by our use of oil from the Middle East, has aggravated these problems. Last March, a peer-reviewed report titled "Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought," published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, concluded that the Syrian drought of 2007-10 was intensified by climate disruption, contributed to food shortages, and worsened the region's social and political distress.

Retired Navy Rear Adm. David Titley, a meteorologist who led the U.S. Navy's Task Force on Climate Change, said the report indicates "you can draw a very credible climate connection to this disaster we call ISIS right now."

So, one theme I heard in Europe is that our self-serving efforts to secure oil from the Middle East have boomeranged. Not only did they contribute to climate disruption that now threatens the United States and civilization as a whole, they also created fertile ground for Islamic zealots to use simplistic religious doctrines to convince a small group of malcontents to commit unconscionable acts of violence against us and others.

As one person summarized the situation during a meeting I attended: “It’s payback time.”

Can we learn from our mistakes? We must protect ourselves from jihadist murderers. But we must also accept responsibility for our contribution to the problem and use a comprehensive approach that addresses the economic, social and political distress felt by so many in the Middle East.

At the same time, we must do our part to prevent runaway climate disruption by rapidly weaning ourselves off oil. We also have a responsibility to help the people of the Middle East prepare for droughts, food shortages, and other climate impacts that our use of their oil helped produce. Equally important, we must help them build widespread psycho-social-spiritual resilience to prevent reactions to climate-related and other adversities that lead them to lash out at others.

Above all, our efforts must be grounded in the realization that we live in an interconnected world, and that actions that serve only our interests will ultimately circle back and hurt us.

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