

Why the Arabs don’t want us in Syria

They don’t hate ‘our freedoms.’ They hate that we’ve betrayed our ideals in their own countries — for oil.

By Robert F. Kennedy, Jr

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In part because my father was murdered by an Arab, I’ve made an effort to understand the impact of U.S. policy in the Mideast and particularly the factors that sometimes motivate bloodthirsty responses from the Islamic world against our country. As we focus on the rise of the Islamic State and search for the source of the savagery that took so many innocent lives in Paris and San Bernardino, we might want to look beyond the convenient explanations of religion and ideology. Instead we should examine the more complex rationales of history and oil — and how they often point the finger of blame back at our own shores.

America’s unsavory record of violent interventions in Syria — little-known to the American people yet well-known to Syrians — sowed fertile ground for the violent Islamic jihadism that now complicates any effective response by our government to address the challenge of ISIL. So long as the American public and policymakers are unaware of this past, further interventions are likely only to compound the crisis. Secretary of State John Kerry this week announced a “provisional” ceasefire in Syria. But since U.S. leverage and prestige within Syria is minimal — and the ceasefire doesn’t include key combatants such as Islamic State and al Nusra — it’s bound to be a shaky truce at best. Similarly President Obama’s stepped-up military intervention in Libya — U.S. airstrikes targeted an Islamic State training camp last week — is likely to strengthen rather than weaken the radicals. As the New York Times reported in a December 8, 2015, front-page story, Islamic State political leaders and strategic planners are working to provoke an American military intervention. They know from experience this will flood their ranks with volunteer fighters, drown the voices of moderation and unify the Islamic world against America.

To understand this dynamic, we need to look at history from the Syrians’ perspective and particularly the seeds of the current conflict. Long before our 2003 occupation of Iraq triggered the Sunni uprising that has now morphed into the Islamic State, the CIA had nurtured violent jihadism as a Cold War weapon and freighted U.S./ Syrian relationships with toxic baggage.

This did not happen without controversy at home. In July 1957, following a failed coup in Syria by the CIA, my uncle, Sen. John F. Kennedy, infuriated the Eisenhower White House, the leaders of both political parties and our European allies with a milestone speech endorsing the right of self-governance in the Arab world and an end to America’s imperialist meddling in Arab countries. Throughout my lifetime, and particularly during my frequent travels to the Mideast, countless Arabs have fondly recalled that speech to me as the clearest statement of the idealism they expected from the U.S. Kennedy’s speech was a call for recommitting America to the high values our country had championed in the Atlantic Charter; the formal pledge that all the former European colonies would have the right to self-determination following World War II. Franklin D. Roosevelt had strong-armed Winston Churchill and the other allied leaders to sign the Atlantic Charter in 1941 as a precondition for U.S. support in the European war against fascism.

But thanks in large part to Allen Dulles and the CIA, whose foreign policy intrigues were often directly at odds with the stated policies of our nation, the idealistic path outlined in the Atlantic Charter was the road not taken. In 1957, my grandfather, Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, sat on a secret committee charged with investigating the CIA’s clandestine mischief in the Mideast. The so called “Bruce-Lovett Report,” to which he was a signatory, described CIA coup plots in Jordan, Syria, Iran, Iraq and Egypt, all common knowledge on the Arab street, but virtually unknown to the American people who believed, at face value, their government’s denials. The report blamed the CIA for the rampant anti-Americanism that was then mysteriously taking root “in the many countries in the world today.” The Bruce-Lovett Report pointed out that such interventions were antithetical to American values and had compromised America’s international leadership and moral authority without the knowledge of the American people. The report also said that the CIA never considered how we would treat such interventions if some foreign government were to engineer them in our country.

This is the bloody history that modern interventionists like George W. Bush, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio miss when they recite their narcissistic trope that Mideast nationalists “hate us for our freedoms.” For the most part they don’t; instead they hate us for the way we betrayed those freedoms — our own ideals — within their borders.

For Americans to really understand what’s going on, it’s important to review some details about this sordid but little-remembered history. During the 1950s, President Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers — CIA Director Allen Dulles and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles — rebuffed Soviet treaty proposals to leave the Middle East a neutral zone in the Cold War and let Arabs rule Arabia. Instead, they mounted a clandestine war against Arab nationalism — which Allen Dulles equated with communism — particularly when Arab self-rule threatened oil concessions. They pumped secret American military aid to tyrants in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon favoring puppets with conservative Jihadist ideologies that they regarded as a reliable antidote to Soviet Marxism. At a White House meeting between the CIA’s director of plans, Frank Wisner, and John Foster Dulles, in September 1957, Eisenhower advised the agency, “We should do everything possible to stress the “holy war” aspect,” according to a memo recorded by his staff secretary, Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster.

The CIA began its active meddling in Syria in 1949 — barely a year after the agency’s creation. Syrian patriots had declared war on the Nazis, expelled their Vichy French colonial rulers and crafted a fragile secularist democracy based on the American model. But in March 1949, Syria’s democratically elected president, Shukri-al-Quwatli, hesitated to approve the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, an American project intended to connect the oil fields of Saudi Arabia to the ports of Lebanon via Syria. In his book, Legacy of Ashes, CIA historian Tim Weiner recounts that in retaliation for Al-Quwatli’s lack of enthusiasm for the U.S. pipeline, the CIA engineered a coup replacing al-Quwatli with the CIA’s handpicked dictator, a convicted swindler named Husni al-Za’im. Al-Za’im barely had time to dissolve parliament and approve the American pipeline before his countrymen deposed him, four and a half months into his regime.

Following several counter-coups in the newly destabilized country, the Syrian people again tried democracy in 1955, re-electing al-Quwatli and his National Party. Al-Quwatli was still a Cold War neutralist, but, stung by American involvement in his ouster, he now leaned toward the Soviet camp. That posture caused CIA Director Dulles to declare that “Syria is ripe for a coup” and send his two coup wizards, Kim Roosevelt and Rocky Stone, to Damascus.

Two years earlier, Roosevelt and Stone had orchestrated a coup in Iran against the democratically elected President Mohammed Mosaddegh, after Mosaddegh tried to renegotiate the terms of Iran’s lopsided contracts with the British oil giant Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now BP). Mosaddegh was the first elected leader in Iran’s 4,000-year history and a popular champion for democracy across the developing world. Mosaddegh expelled all British diplomats after uncovering a coup attempt by U.K. intelligence officers working in cahoots with BP. Mosaddegh, however, made the fatal mistake of resisting his advisers’ pleas to also expel the CIA, which, they correctly suspected, was complicit in the British plot. Mosaddegh idealized the U.S. as a role model for Iran’s new democracy and incapable of such perfidies. Despite Dulles’ needling, President Harry Truman had forbidden the CIA from actively joining the British caper to topple Mosaddegh. When Eisenhower took office in January 1953, he immediately unleashed Dulles. After ousting Mosaddegh in “Operation Ajax,” Stone and Roosevelt installed Shah Reza Pahlavi, who favored U.S. oil companies but whose two decades of CIA sponsored savagery toward his own people from the Peacock throne would finally ignite the 1979 Islamic revolution that has bedeviled our foreign policy for 35 years.

Flush from his Operation Ajax “success” in Iran, Stone arrived in Damascus in April 1957 with \$3 million to arm and incite Islamic militants and to bribe Syrian military officers and politicians to overthrow al-Quwatli’s democratically elected secularist regime, according to Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA, by John Prados. Working with the Muslim Brotherhood and millions of dollars, Rocky Stone schemed to assassinate Syria’s chief of intelligence, the chief of its General Staff and the chief of the Communist Party, and to engineer “national conspiracies and various strong arm” provocations in Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan that could be blamed on the Syrian Ba’athists. Tim Weiner describes in Legacy of Ashes how the CIA’s plan was to destabilize the Syrian government and create a pretext for an invasion by Iraq and Jordan, whose governments were already under CIA control. Kim Roosevelt forecast that the CIA’s newly installed puppet government would “rely first upon repressive measures and arbitrary exercise of power,” according to declassified CIA documents reported in The Guardian newspaper.

But all that CIA money failed to corrupt the Syrian military officers. The soldiers reported the CIA’s bribery attempts to the Ba’athist regime. In response, the Syrian army invaded the American Embassy, taking Stone prisoner. After harsh interrogation, Stone made a televised confession of his roles in the Iranian coup and the CIA’s aborted attempt to overthrow Syria’s legitimate government. The Syrians ejected Stone and two U.S. Embassy staffers—the first time any American State Department diplomat was barred from an Arab country. The Eisenhower White House hollowly dismissed Stone’s confession as “fabrications” and “slanders,” a denial swallowed whole by the American press, led by the New York Times and believed by the American people, who shared Mosaddegh’s idealistic view of their government. Syria purged all politicians sympathetic to the U.S. and executed for treason all military officers associated with the coup. In retaliation, the U.S. moved the Sixth Fleet to the Mediterranean, threatened war and goaded Turkey to invade Syria. The Turks assembled 50,000 troops on Syria’s borders and backed down only in the face of unified opposition from the Arab League whose leaders were furious at the U.S. intervention. Even after its expulsion, the CIA continued its secret efforts to topple Syria’s democratically elected Ba’athist government. The CIA plotted with Britain’s MI6 to form a “Free Syria Committee” and armed the Muslim Brotherhood to assassinate three Syrian government officials, who had helped expose “the American plot,” according to Matthew Jones in “The ‘Preferred Plan’: The Anglo-American Working Group Report on Covert Action in Syria, 1957.” The CIA’s mischief pushed Syria even further away from the U.S. and into prolonged alliances with Russia and Egypt.

Following the second Syrian coup attempt, anti-American riots rocked the Mideast from Lebanon to Algeria. Among the reverberations was the July 14, 1958 coup, led by the new wave of anti-American Army officers who overthrew Iraq’s pro-American monarch, Nuri al-Said. The coup leaders published secret government documents, exposing Nuri al-Said as a highly paid CIA puppet. In response to American treachery, the new Iraqi government invited Soviet diplomats and economic advisers to Iraq and turned its back on the West.

Having alienated Iraq and Syria, Kim Roosevelt fled the Mideast to work as an executive for the oil industry that he had served so well during his public service career at the CIA. Roosevelt’s replacement as CIA station chief, James Critchfield, attempted a failed assassination plot against the new Iraqi president using a toxic handkerchief, according to Weiner. Five years later, the CIA finally succeeded in deposing the Iraqi president and installing the Ba’ath Party in power in Iran. A charismatic young murderer named Saddam Hussein was one of the distinguished leaders of the CIA’s Ba’athist team. The Ba’ath Party’s Secretary, Ali Saleh Sa’adi, who took office alongside Saddam Hussein, would later say, “We came to power on a CIA train,” according to A Brutal Friendship: The West and the Arab Elite, by Said Aburish, a journalist and author. Aburish recounted that the CIA supplied Saddam and his cronies a murder list of people who “had to be eliminated immediately in order to ensure success.” Tim Weiner writes that Critchfield later acknowledged that the CIA had, in essence, “created Saddam Hussein.” During the Reagan years, the CIA supplied Hussein with billions of dollars in training, Special Forces support, weapons and battlefield intelligence, knowing that he was using poisonous mustard and nerve gas and biological weapons — including anthrax obtained from the U.S. government — in his war against Iran. Reagan and his CIA director, Bill Casey, regarded Saddam as a potential friend to the U.S. oil industry and a sturdy barrier against the spread of Iran’s Islamic Revolution. Their emissary, Donald Rumsfeld, presented Saddam with golden cowboy spurs and a menu of chemical/biological and conventional weapons on a 1983 trip to Baghdad. At the same time, the CIA was illegally supplying Saddam’s enemy, Iran, with thousands of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to fight Iraq, a crime made famous during the Iran-Contra scandal. Jihadists from both sides later turned many of those CIA-supplied weapons against the American people.

Even as America contemplates yet another violent Mideast intervention, most Americans are unaware of the many ways that “blowback” from previous CIA blunders has helped craft the current crisis. The reverberations from decades of CIA shenanigans continue to echo across the Mideast today in national capitals and from mosques to madras schools over the wrecked landscape of democracy and moderate Islam that the CIA helped obliterate.

A parade of Iranian and Syrian dictators, including Bashar al-Assad and his father, have invoked the history of the CIA’s bloody coups as a pretext for their authoritarian rule, repressive tactics and their need for a strong Russian alliance. These stories are therefore well known to the people of Syria and Iran who naturally interpret talk of U.S. intervention in the context of that history.

While the compliant American press parrots the narrative that our military support for the Syrian insurgency is purely humanitarian, many Arabs see the present crisis as just another proxy war over pipelines and geopolitics. Before rushing deeper into the conflagration, it would be wise for us to consider the abundant facts supporting that perspective.

In their view, our war against Bashar Assad did not begin with the peaceful civil protests of the Arab Spring in 2011. Instead it began in 2000, when Qatar proposed to construct a \$10 billion, 1,500 kilometer pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Qatar shares with Iran the South Pars/North Dome gas field, the world’s richest natural gas repository. The international trade embargo until recently prohibited Iran from selling gas abroad. Meanwhile, Qatar’s gas can reach European markets only if it is liquefied and shipped by sea, a route that restricts volume and dramatically raises costs. The proposed pipeline would have linked Qatar directly to European energy markets via distribution terminals in Turkey, which would pocket rich transit fees. The Qatar/Turkey pipeline would give the Sunni kingdoms of the Persian Gulf decisive domination of world natural gas markets and strengthen Qatar, America’s closest ally in the Arab world. Qatar hosts two massive American military bases and the U.S. Central Command’s Mideast headquarters.

The EU, which gets 30 percent of its gas from Russia, was equally hungry for the pipeline, which would have given its members cheap energy and relief from Vladimir Putin’s stifling economic and political leverage. Turkey, Russia’s second largest gas customer, was particularly anxious to end its reliance on its ancient rival and to position itself as the lucrative transect hub for Asian fuels to EU markets. The Qatari pipeline would have benefited Saudi Arabia’s conservative Sunni monarchy by giving it a foothold in Shia-dominated Syria. The Saudis’ geopolitical goal is to contain the economic and political power of the kingdom’s principal rival, Iran, a Shiite state, and close ally of Bashar Assad. The Saudi monarchy viewed the U.S.-sponsored Shiite takeover in Iraq (and, more recently, the termination of the Iran trade embargo) as a demotion to its regional power status and was already engaged in a proxy war against Tehran in Yemen, highlighted by the Saudi genocide against the Iranian backed Houthi tribe.

Of course, the Russians, who sell 70 percent of their gas exports to Europe, viewed the Qatar/Turkey pipeline as an existential threat. In Putin’s view, the Qatar pipeline is a NATO plot to change the status quo, deprive Russia of its only foothold in the Middle East, strangle the Russian economy and end Russian leverage in the European energy market. In 2009, Assad announced that he would refuse to sign the agreement to allow the pipeline to run through Syria “to protect the interests of our Russian ally.”

Assad further enraged the Gulf’s Sunni monarchs by endorsing a Russian-approved “Islamic pipeline” running from Iran’s side of the gas field through Syria and to the ports of Lebanon. The Islamic pipeline would make Shiite Iran, not Sunni Qatar, the principal supplier to the European energy market and dramatically increase Iran’s influence in the Midkke East and the world. Israel also was understandably determined to derail the Islamic pipeline, which would enrich Iran and Syria and presumably strengthen their proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas.

Secret cables and reports by the U.S., Saudi and Israeli intelligence agencies indicate that the moment Assad rejected the Qatari pipeline, military and intelligence planners quickly arrived at the consensus that fomenting a Sunni uprising in Syria to overthrow the uncooperative Bashar Assad was a feasible path to achieving the shared objective of completing the Qatar/Turkey gas link. In 2009, according to WikiLeaks, soon after Bashar Assad rejected the Qatar pipeline, the CIA began funding opposition groups in Syria. It is important to note that this was well before the Arab Spring-engendered uprising against Assad.

Bashar Assad’s family is Alawite, a Muslim sect widely perceived as aligned with the Shiite camp. “Bashar Assad was never supposed to be president,” journalist Seymour Hersh told me in an interview. “His father brought him back from medical school in London when his elder brother, the heir apparent, was killed in a car crash.” Before the war started, according to Hersh, Assad was moving to liberalize the country. “They had internet and newspapers and ATM machines and Assad wanted to move toward the west. After 9/11, he gave thousands of invaluable files to the CIA on jihadist radicals, who he considered a mutual enemy.” Assad’s regime was deliberately secular and Syria was impressively diverse. The Syrian government and military, for example, were 80 percent Sunni. Assad maintained peace among his diverse peoples by a strong, disciplined army loyal to the Assad family, an allegiance secured by a nationally esteemed and highly paid officer corps, a coldly efficient intelligence apparatus and a penchant for brutality that, prior to the war, was rather moderate compared to those of other Mideast leaders, including our current allies. According to Hersh, “He certainly wasn’t beheading people every Wednesday like the Saudis do in Mecca.”

Another veteran journalist, Bob Parry, echoes that assessment. “No one in the region has clean hands, but in the realms of torture, mass killings, [suppressing] civil liberties and supporting terrorism, Assad is much better than the Saudis.” No one believed that the regime was vulnerable to the anarchy that had riven Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. By the spring of 2011, there were small, peaceful demonstrations in Damascus against repression by Assad’s regime. These were mainly the effluvia of the Arab Spring that spread virally across the Arab League States the previous summer. However, WikiLeaks cables indicate that the CIA was already on the ground in Syria.

But the Sunni kingdoms with vast petrodollars at stake wanted a much deeper involvement from America. On September 4, 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry told a congressional hearing that the Sunni kingdoms had offered to foot the bill for a U.S. invasion of Syria to oust Bashar Assad. “In fact, some of them have said that if the United States is prepared to go do the whole thing, the way we’ve done it previously in other places [Iraq], they’ll carry the cost.” Kerry reiterated the offer to Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.): “With respect to Arab countries offering to bear the costs of [an American invasion] to topple Assad, the answer is profoundly yes, they have. The offer is on the table.”

Despite pressure from Republicans, Barack Obama balked at hiring out young Americans to die as mercenaries for a pipeline conglomerate. Obama wisely ignored Republican clamoring to put ground troops in Syria or to funnel more funding to “moderate insurgents.” But by late 2011, Republican pressure and our Sunni allies had pushed the American government into the fray.

In 2011, the U.S. joined France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UK to form the Friends of Syria Coalition, which formally demanded the removal of Assad. The CIA provided \$6 million to Barada, a British TV channel, to produce pieces entreating Assad’s ouster. Saudi intelligence documents, published by WikiLeaks, show that by 2012, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia were arming, training and funding radical jihadist Sunni fighters from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere to overthrow the Assad’s Shiite-allied regime. Qatar, which had the most to gain, invested \$3 billion in building the insurgency and invited the Pentagon to train insurgents at U.S. bases in Qatar. According to an April 2014 article by Seymour Hersh, the CIA weapons ratlines were financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The idea of fomenting a Sunni-Shiite civil war to weaken the Syrian and Iranian regimes in order to maintain control of the region’s petrochemical supplies was not a novel notion in the Pentagon’s lexicon. A damning 2008 Pentagon-funded Rand report proposed a precise blueprint for what was about to happen. That report observes that control of the Persian Gulf oil and gas deposits will remain, for the U.S., “a strategic priority” that “will interact strongly with that of prosecuting the long war.” Rand recommended using “covert action, information operations, unconventional warfare” to enforce a “divide and rule” strategy. “The United States and its local allies could use the nationalist jihadists to launch a proxy campaign” and “U.S. leaders could also choose to capitalize on the sustained Shia-Sunni conflict trajectory by taking the side of the conservative Sunni regimes against Shiite empowerment movements in the Muslim world ... possibly supporting authoritative Sunni governments against a continually hostile Iran.”

As predicted, Assad’s overreaction to the foreign-made crisis — dropping barrel bombs onto Sunni strongholds and killing civilians — polarized Syria’s Shiite/Sunni divide and allowed U.S. policymakers to sell Americans the idea that the pipeline struggle was a humanitarian war. When Sunni soldiers of the Syrian Army began defecting in 2013, the western coalition armed the Free Syrian Army to further destabilize Syria. The press portrait of the Free Syrian Army as cohesive battalions of Syrian moderates was delusional. The dissolved units regrouped in hundreds of independent militias most of which were commanded by, or allied with, jihadi militants who were the most committed and effective fighters. By then, the Sunni armies of Al Qaeda in Iraq were crossing the border from Iraq into Syria and joining forces with the squadrons of deserters from the Free Syrian Army, many of them trained and armed by the U.S.

Despite the prevailing media portrait of a moderate Arab uprising against the tyrant Assad, U.S. intelligence planners knew from the outset that their pipeline proxies were radical jihadists who would probably carve themselves a brand new Islamic caliphate from the Sunni regions of Syria and Iraq. Two years before ISIL throat cutters stepped on the world stage, a seven-page August 12, 2012, study by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, obtained by the right-wing group Judicial Watch, warned that thanks to the ongoing support by U.S./ Sunni Coalition for radical Sunni Jihadists, “the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI (now ISIS), are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria.”

Using U.S. and Gulf state funding, these groups had turned the peaceful protests against Bashar Assad toward “a clear sectarian (Shiite vs. Sunni) direction.” The paper notes that the conflict had become a sectarian civil war supported by Sunni “religious and political powers.” The report paints the Syrian conflict as a global war for control of the region’s resources with “the west, Gulf countries and Turkey supporting [Assad’s] opposition, while Russia, China and Iran support the regime.” The Pentagon authors of the seven-page report appear to endorse the predicted advent of the ISIS caliphate: “If the situation unravels, there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor) and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want in order to isolate the Syrian regime.” The Pentagon report warns that this new principality could move across the Iraqi border to Mosul and Ramadi and “declare an Islamic state through its union with other terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria.”

Of course, this is precisely what has happened. Not coincidentally, the regions of Syria occupied by the Islamic State exactly encompass the proposed route of the Qatari pipeline.

But then, in 2014, our Sunni proxies horrified the American people by severing heads and driving a million refugees toward Europe, “Strategies based upon the idea that the enemy of my enemy is my friend can be kind of blinding,” says Tim Clemente, who chaired the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force from 2004 to 2008 and served as liaison in Iraq between the FBI, the Iraqi National Police and the U.S. military. “We made the same mistake when we trained the mujahideen in Afghanistan. The moment the Russians left, our supposed friends started smashing antiquities, enslaving women, severing body parts and shooting at us,” Clemente told me in an interview.

When the Islamic State’s “Jihadi John” began murdering prisoners on TV, the White House pivoted, talking less about deposing Assad and more about regional stability. The Obama administration began putting daylight between itself and the insurgency we had funded. The White House pointed accusing fingers at our allies. On October 3, 2014, Vice President Joe Biden told students at the John F. Kennedy Jr. forum at the Institute of Politics at Harvard that “our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria.” He explained that Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were “so determined to take down Assad” that they had launched a “proxy Sunni-Shia war” funneling “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who

would fight against Assad. Except the people who were being supplied were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda” — the two groups that merged in 2014 to form the Islamic State. Biden seemed angered that our trusted “friends” could not be trusted to follow the American agenda.

Across the Mideast, Arab leaders routinely accuse the U.S. of having created the Islamic State. To most Americans, such accusations seem insane. However, to many Arabs, the evidence of U.S. involvement is so abundant that they conclude that our role in fostering the Islamic State must have been deliberate.

In fact, many of the Islamic State fighters and their commanders are ideological and organizational successors to the jihadists that the CIA has been nurturing for more than 30 years from Syria and Egypt to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Prior to the American invasion, there was no Al Qaeda in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. President George W. Bush destroyed Saddam’s secularist government, and his viceroy, Paul Bremer, in a monumental act of mismanagement, effectively created the Sunni Army, now named the Islamic State. Bremer elevated the Shites to power and banned Saddam’s ruling Ba’ath Party, laying off some 700,000 mostly Sunni, government and party officials from ministers to schoolteachers. He then disbanded the 380,000-man army, which was 80 percent Sunni. Bremer’s actions stripped a million of Iraq’s Sunnis of rank, property, wealth and power; leaving a desperate underclass of angry, educated, capable, trained and heavily armed Sunnis with little left to lose. The Sunni insurgency named itself Al Qaeda in Iraq. Beginning in 2011, our allies funded the invasion by AQI fighters into Syria. In April 2013, having entered Syria, AQI changed its name to ISIL. According to Dexter Filkins of the New Yorker, “ISIS is run by a council of former Iraqi generals. ... Many are members of Saddam Hussein’s secular Ba’ath Party who converted to radical Islam in American prisons.” The \$500 million in U.S. military aid that Obama did send to Syria almost certainly ended up benefiting these militant jihadists. Tim Clemente, the former chairman of the FBI’s joint task force, told me that the difference between the Iraq and Syria conflicts is the millions of military-aged men who are fleeing the battlefield for Europe rather than staying to fight for their communities. The obvious explanation is that the nation’s moderates are fleeing a war that is not their war. They simply want to escape being crushed between the anvil of Assad’s Russian-backed tyranny and the vicious jihadist Sunni hammer that we had a hand in wielding in a global battle over competing pipelines. You can’t blame the Syrian people for not widely embracing a blueprint for their nation minted in either Washington or Moscow. The superpowers have left no options for an idealistic future that moderate Syrians might consider fighting for. And no one wants to die for a pipeline.

What is the answer? If our objective is long-term peace in the Mideast, self-government by the Arab nations and national security at home, we must undertake any new intervention in the region with an eye on history and an intense desire to learn its lessons. Only when we Americans understand the historical and political context of this conflict will we apply appropriate scrutiny to the decisions of our leaders. Using the same imagery and language that supported our 2003 war against Saddam Hussein, our political leaders led Americans to believe that our Syrian intervention is an idealistic war against tyranny, terrorism and religious fanaticism. We tend to dismiss as mere cynicism the views of those Arabs who see the current crisis as a rerun of the same old plots about pipelines and geopolitics. But, if we are to have an effective foreign policy, we must recognize the Syrian conflict is a war over control of resources indistinguishable from the myriad clandestine and undeclared oil wars we have been fighting in the Mideast for 65 years. And only when we see this conflict as a proxy war over a pipeline do events become comprehensible. It’s the only paradigm that explains why the GOP on Capitol Hill and the Obama administration are still fixated on regime change rather than regional stability, why the Obama administration can find no Syrian moderates to fight the war, why ISIL blew up a Russian passenger plane, why the Saudis just executed a powerful Shiite cleric only to have their embassy burned in Tehran, why Russia is bombing non-ISIL fighters and why Turkey went out of its way to shoot down a Russian jet. The million refugees now flooding into Europe are refugees of a pipeline war and CIA blundering.

Clemente compares ISIL to Colombia’s FARC — a drug cartel with a revolutionary ideology to inspire its footsoldiers. “You have to think of ISIS as an oil cartel,” Clemente said. “In the end, money is the governing rationale. The religious ideology is a tool that inspires its soldiers to give their lives for an oil cartel.”

Once we strip this conflict of its humanitarian patina and recognize the Syrian conflict as an oil war, our foreign policy strategy becomes clear. Like the Syrians fleeing for Europe, no American wants to send their child to die for a pipeline. Instead, our first priority should be the one no one ever mentions — we need to kick our Mideast oil jones, an increasingly feasible objective, as the U.S. becomes more energy independent. Next, we need to dramatically reduce our military profile in the Middle East and let the Arabs run Arabia. Other than humanitarian assistance and guaranteeing the security of Israel’s borders, the U.S. has no legitimate role in this conflict. While the facts prove that we played a role in creating the crisis, history shows that we have little power to resolve it.

As we contemplate history, it’s breathtaking to consider the astonishing consistency with which virtually every violent intervention in the Middle East since World War II by our country has resulted in miserable failure and horrendously costly blowback. A 1997 U.S. Department of Defense report found that “the data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement abroad and an increase in terrorist attacks against the U.S.” Let’s face it; what we call the “war on terror” is really just another oil war. We’ve squandered \$6 trillion on three wars abroad and on constructing a national security warfare state at home since oilman Dick Cheney declared the “Long War” in 2001. The only winners have been the military contractors and oil companies that have pocketed historic profits, the intelligence agencies that have grown exponentially in power and influence to the detriment of our freedoms and the jihadists who invariably used our interventions as their most effective recruiting tool. We have compromised our values, butchered our own youth, killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people, subverted our idealism and squandered our national treasures in fruitless and costly adventures abroad. In the process, we have helped our worst enemies and turned America, once the world’s beacon of freedom, into a national security surveillance state and an international moral pariah.

America’s founding fathers warned Americans against standing armies, foreign entanglements and, in John Quincy Adams’ words, “going abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Those wise men understood that imperialism abroad is incompatible with democracy and civil rights at home. The Atlantic Charter echoed their seminal American ideal that each nation should have the right to self-determination. Over the past seven decades, the Dulles brothers, the Cheney gang, the neocons and their ilk have hijacked that fundamental principle of American idealism and deployed our military and intelligence apparatus to serve the mercantile interests of large corporations and particularly, the petroleum companies and military contractors that have literally made a killing from these conflicts.

It’s time for Americans to turn America away from this new imperialism and back to the path of idealism and democracy. We should let the Arabs govern Arabia and turn our energies to the great endeavor of nation building at home. We need to begin this process, not by invading Syria, but by ending the ruinous addiction to oil that has warped U.S. foreign policy for half a century.

This article has been updated to identify Robert Kennedy as U.S. Attorney General.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. is the president of Waterkeeper Alliance. His newest book is Thimerosal: Let The Science Speak.