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Defeat ISIS by letting Syria loose

By Doug Bandow
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Administration officials proclaim the Islamic State's isolated experiment in 7th Century Islam to pose a dire threat to America. After promising to strictly limit the military mission in Iraq, the president is preparing to expand the war to Syria, where the administration is working to overthrow the Assad government—which now blocks Islamic control over the entire country. Instead, the administration should encourage other nations, starting with Syria, to kill ISIL radicals.

Iraq is a catastrophic failure. Yet the Obama administration risks falling into war there again. The president originally undertook what he said would be a limited bombing campaign. Since then the campaign has broadened to general support for forces opposing ISIL.

Now Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wants to address the Islamic State “on both sides of what is essentially at this point a nonexistent border” between Iraq and Syria.

However, Washington's intelligence capabilities remain limited over the “nonexistent” border. More important, the Obama administration has spent three years attempting to overthrow Syria's Assad regime, which possesses an air defense system and warned that it would treat any attacks as “aggression.”

Before putting U.S. personnel and materiel at risk, the administration should reconsider its policy in Syria. The Assad government is even more committed than Washington to eliminating the Islamic State as a geopolitical force.

Yet support for the opposition obviously has weakened the Assad government's ability to fight ISIL. Washington's preference for less radical groups also has discouraged Damascus from targeting the Islamic State, whose existence inhibits U.S. involvement.

Reaching a modus vivendi with Damascus would encourage Assad to focus on his most competent and dangerous enemy, ISIL. Assad is no friend of liberty, but Washington must set priorities.

The administration also should emphasize the responsibility of surrounding states to combat the group. For instance, Baghdad pursued a narrow sectarian course, crippling politics and the military.

Replacing Maliki is a good first step, but not nearly enough. Iraq must reach a broader understanding with Sunnis and Kurds to strengthen internal forces against ISIL.

Ankara, which claims a position of regional leadership, has much at stake as well. The group considers Turkish lands to be part of the “caliphate.” The Islamic State’s attacks on Kurdistan could spur Kurdish refugees into Turkey.

Jordan is far more vulnerable. The Gulf States are more distant, but Sunni radicals are unlikely to leave the corrupt and licentious Sunni royals in peace.

While these countries may not be willing to abandon their campaign to oust Assad, they could better target their efforts to support groups not dedicated to destabilizing the entire region. Washington should insist that the Syrian civil war is no excuse for measures which strengthen the Islamic State.

Equally important, Jordan and Turkey, both on the Islamic State’s hit list, should deploy their air forces and ground forces, if necessary, against ISIL fighters. Kurdish forces have been pushing back against the Islamic State, but still need better and more weapons, which Turkey could provide. Ankara has improved its ties with Kurdistan in recent years.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have a different role to play. While military forces would be useful, as Sunni states they might more usefully delegitimize ISIL’s claim of a new “caliphate.”

Even Iran can assist, though that might discomfit Washington. Tehran will support Baghdad’s Shia government irrespective of America’s preferences, but could best aid anti-ISIL efforts by backing Shia-Sunni reconciliation.

Finally, European states should reconsider their priorities in Syria. The Europeans also could help provide weapons and training to the Kurds and others.

The Islamic State is evil. But its capabilities remain limited. Its members are capable of slitting throats of individual Americans, but the group does not pose an existential threat to the U.S.

Rather than turn ISIL into a military priority and take America into war against the group, Washington should use its unique position—allied with many nations in the region and talking with the rest—to organize an Islamic coalition against the Islamic State. Even Gen. Dempsey called for a regional effort to “squeeze ISIS from multiple directions,” but that actually requires Washington to do less militarily.

ISIL's rise has set in motion the very forces necessary for its defeat. Rather than hinder creation of a coalition by taking charge militarily, Washington should encourage it by stepping back. The U.S. already has gone to war twice in Iraq. There's no reason to believe that the third time will be the charm.

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