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## Stay out of Iraq's sectarian civil war

By Doug Bandow

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The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) represents a significant failure of U.S. policy. Unfortunately, the Obama administration is tip-toeing back into Iraq even though ISIL so far does not pose a significant security, let alone an existential, threat to America requiring military action.

Despite its successes, ISIL lacks the strength necessary to capture Iraq's capital, let alone gain control of majority-Shia nation. Most important, so far, at least, ISIL, unlike al-Qaeda, has not confronted the U.S. Thus, Washington should react circumspectly, avoiding further unnecessary entanglements.

Recent experience offers several sobering lessons for confronting ISIL's rise.

Intervention brings unintended, unpredictable, and uncontrollable consequences. America's experience in the Middle East highlights how one intervention almost always begets another. Removing Saddam Hussein triggered years of bloody conflict.

Even had the new government in Baghdad backed a continued U.S. military presence, the latter likely would not have prevented hostilities from exploding today. Barring reconciliation, opined Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 2007, "no amount of troops in no amount of time will make much of a difference."

War is rarely required against America's potential adversaries. A restrained U.S. response emphasizing overwhelming retaliation, with allies taking principal direct responsibility for their security, is the best foreign policy approach.

In contrast, transnational terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, are almost impossible to deter. But ISIL's fighters are acting more like an irregular military. In fact, the organization's break with al-Qaeda in part reflected the latter's focus on the "far enemy," that is, the U.S. ISIL's recent verbal threats against Washington appear intended to deter American involvement.

Moreover, the group will have trouble maintaining its gains. The organization's Iraq success has depended on support of Baathist loyalists and tribal leaders, who are most interested in winning a better deal from Baghdad. Few Sunnis appear interested in returning to the 7th century. Staying out, so America does not become a common enemy, makes it more likely ISIL will overreach.

U.S. military action almost certainly would result in more costs than benefits. Washington has learned the limits of military power, especially when imposed from afar with little public support. The president's limited airstrikes so far will have minimal impact, but there are few better options.

Inserting military advisers is risky. Many Iraqi military units likely are infiltrated by ISIL and other extremists, making U.S. personnel vulnerable to attack, rather like in Afghanistan, with the spate of "green on blue" killings. Drone strikes against ISIL's leadership would not likely be enough to break the group.

Airpower has become the preferred military panacea. But broader attacks are unlikely to defeat ISIL, which has mixed guerilla with conventional tactics. Air strikes would have limited effectiveness in urban warfare and could not liberate captured cities. Worse, intervening militarily without separating ISIL from other Sunni groups almost inevitably would mean killing people once allied with Washington against al-Qaeda as part of the "Sunni awakening."

Washington loses by giving a blank check to Baghdad. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has misgoverned, exacerbated sectarian tensions, and weakened his nation's governing institutions. Effectively supporting his government would reward behavior which has helped bring his country to near ruin.

The administration long has unsuccessfully pushed Maliki to be more inclusive. Washington now is pushing for his ouster, but any replacement might not be much better. Moreover, unconditionally backing Baghdad risks foreclosing potential solutions, including some form of federalism or even partition.

Backing the Syrian resistance risks further undermining the Iraqi government. The civil war in Syria long has been beyond Washington's control. Funding the opposition would help contain ISIL only if groups focused their efforts against ISIL. But that will never be their primary objective. The Damascus government is odious, but not as inimical to U.S. interests as an ISIL "caliphate."

ISIL is more a problem for America's friends than for America. Islamic extremism most directly threatens countries in the region. These states, overwhelmingly Muslim other than Israel and Lebanon, possess greater credibility in confronting ISIL. These nations also have the most at stake.

Iraq must convince the group's Sunni allies to cooperate with a reformed government in Baghdad rather than reconstruct an ancient caliphate. Iran is more committed than America to backing Iraq.

Turkey has a capable military. Aid from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to extremist opposition forces in Syria has proved counterproductive. Other countries, including Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, have an interest in rolling back ISIL's gains.

U.S. options are limited. ISIL has grown out of past U.S. policy mistakes. Washington cannot afford to be stampeded into another unnecessary and counterproductive war.

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