



Obama Administration Debates Bombing Syria To Fight Islamic State; Instead, Washington Should Allow Syria And Others To Battle Killer Radicals

By Doug Bandow
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Until now, President Barack Obama's foreign policy appeared to be based more on reason than emotion. In contrast to the easily excitable and often angry Sen. John McCain, for instance, the president did not suggest war was the answer to every international problem.

However, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant may have cost President Obama his equanimity. Administration officials are proclaiming this isolated experiment in 7th Century Islam to pose a dire threat to America. After promising to strictly limit the mission in Iraq, Washington is preparing to expand the war to Syria, where the administration has spent years working to overthrow the Assad government—the most formidable force blocking Islamic control over the entire country. Instead, the administration should push other nations into the lead.

Iraq is a catastrophic failure. America's last four presidents share the blame. Most at fault is George W. Bush, whose ill-considered decision to attack Iraq blew up the nation and ignited sectarian war. Now many of his backers are campaigning for another invasion of sorts, with U.S. ground forces taking on everyone, from ISIL to Iran to Iraq's Shia-dominated national government. Naturally, these exponents of error neither acknowledge the disastrous consequences of their past policies nor offer evidence that their new proposals would yield better results.

Yet the Obama administration risks falling into war again. The president originally undertook what he said would be a limited bombing campaign to save stranded refugees and protect U.S. personnel. Since then the campaign has been broadened to general support for forces opposing ISIL, though still justified as a "security" measure for Americans. (The president explained to Congress that if ISIL forces held the Mosul Dam, it could fail, threatening the lives of the U.S. staff in Baghdad. Such "reasoning" sets no limits on American involvement in Iraq's conflict.)

Now officials want to go further. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that the Islamic State must be "addressed on both sides of what is

essentially at this point a nonexistent border” between Iraq and Syria. Operating within Syria would pose a much greater challenge than launching strikes in Iraq, 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. The latter says it would treat U.S. intervention as “aggression” and possesses an air defense system capable of downing American aircraft and drones.

Before putting U.S. personnel and materiel at risk, the administration should reconsider its policy in Syria. The administration appears to have decided that its number one Middle East priority is confronting ISIL. Gen. Dempsey called the Islamic State “an organization that has an apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision which will eventually have to be defeated.” Secretary of State John Kerry said simply the group “must be destroyed.”

However, the Syrian government is even more committed than Washington to eliminating ISIL as a geopolitical force. The group controls perhaps a third of Syria and over the weekend captured Tabqa airfield, giving the Islamic State full possession of Raqqa province.

Allied support for the radicals 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. In contrast, defeating more moderate forces tends to diminish Western interest and intervention in the conflict.

Reaching a modus vivendi with Damascus would change its calculus. End efforts to oust Assad and he would focus on his most competent and dangerous enemy, ISIL. A U.S. policy encouraging the Syrian government to defeat the group in Syria, including breaking the Islamic State’s hold over both the city and province of Raqqa, would undermine the organization’s capabilities in Iraq, making it more vulnerable to concerted action by both the Baghdad government and Kurdish authorities.

Of course, Assad is no friend of liberty. But Washington must set priorities. ISIL is far more dangerous, an evil organization motivated by an extremist theology and committed to upending the entire region. After U.S. airstrikes the group gained an incentive to launch terrorist strikes on America. The administration’s policy of first supporting and then opposing Assad has been half-hearted and inept, helping to spawn the Islamic State. Washington should reverse course and stop undermining the only military force capable of defeating ISIL in Syria.

Washington also should emphasize the responsibility of surrounding states to combat the group. The Islamic State’s priority remains creating a “caliphate” stretching across several nations, including Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. These three governments and the Gulf monarchies should do the heavy lifting in defeating the Islamic State.

The greatest responsibility for the ongoing debacle in Iraq, other than the Bush administration, lies with leading Shia politicians in Baghdad. After years of Sunni domination the newly empowered Shiites, led by Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al-Maliki, pursued their own narrow sectarian course, crippling politics and the military.

Replacing Maliki is a good first step, but not nearly enough. Baghdad must reach a broader understanding with Sunnis and Kurds to strengthen internal forces against ISIL. Indeed, Sunnis need a positive reason to oppose the Islamic State given their unresolved grievances with Baghdad. Otherwise the Shia majority faces an extended civil war in which even victory would be very costly. The administration correctly insists on no U.S. rescue of a narrowly sectarian regime in Iraq.

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.” ISIL’s attacks on Kurdistan could spur a rush of Kurdish refugees into Turkey, unsettling politics involving Turkey’s Kurds. Turkey is not at risk of disintegration, but problems created by a growing ISIL would not long remain outside Turkey’s borders.

Jordan is far more vulnerable: a monarchy of dubious legitimacy rules over a population containing many Palestinians and a society overwhelmed by foreign refugees. If the Islamic State becomes a de facto government Amman faces an increased threat of subversion. The Gulf States are more distant, but if Sunni radicals gain more influence the latter are unlikely to leave the corrupt and licentious Sunni royals in peace.

While Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the others 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. Today the administration is considering bombing ISIL weapons paid for by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, and ISIL personnel allowed to transit by Turkey. There should be no such weapons and personnel to bomb in the future.

Equally important, Jordan and Turkey, both on the Islamic State’s hit list, should deploy their air forces against ISIL fighters. And if ground forces become necessary to combat ISIL, Jordan and Turkey also should step up. As a quasi-government the Islamic State likely would devote more effort to undermining its neighbors than attacking Americans.

Kurdish forces have been pushing back against the Islamic State, but still need better and more weapons, which Turkey could provide. Joint military efforts would offer Ankara an opportunity to strengthen its ties to Kurdistan, which have improved in recent years. Indeed, the Erdogan government could use the opportunity to increase its leverage over an entity which once caused concerns because of the long-running, violent Kurdish separatist campaign within Turkey.

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 combat ISIL’s horrendous theology and delegitimize its claim of a new “caliphate.” Saudi Arabia, in particular, has

sown the wind by underwriting fundamentalist if not necessarily violent Islamic theologies. This gives Riyadh a special responsibility to confront ISIL's religious claims.

Even Iran can assist, though that might discomfit Washington. U.S. officials must get over their illusion that they are masters of the universe capable of reordering human affairs to create some Platonic ideal concocted within the Beltway. The Islamic State has explicitly denounced Iran's leaders as enemies. Tehran will support Baghdad's Shia government irrespective of America's preferences, but could best aid anti-ISIL efforts by backing Shia-Sunni reconciliation. While reaching a nuclear deal remains Washington's highest priority involving Iraq, informal discussions on confronting the Islamic State would be useful.

Finally, European states, most notably France, Britain, and Italy, long have been interested in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington should engage its Western allies about priorities in Syria, and how best to stem the Islamic State's rise. 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 Americans unfortunately captured nearby, but the group does not pose an existential threat to the U.S. Moreover, so far the Islamic has demonstrated only limited terrorist capabilities, especially against the American homeland.

Rather than turn ISIL into a military priority and take the U.S. 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. Iraq and its neighbors have the greatest interest in suppressing ISIL. They have the means to do so. They also have the most credibility in doing so. Washington must create greater incentive for them to do so, by no longer making it hard for Syria to act and unnecessary for the others to do so.

President Obama told the American people that he would “not allow the United States to be dragged in fighting another war in Iraq.” He later emphasized that “there's no American military solution to the larger crisis.” Unfortunately, his actions suggest that he believes otherwise.

Yet ISIL's rise has set in motion the very forces necessary for its defeat. The group has far more enemies than friends, and as recognition of the seriousness of the threat grows, so will the determination of those opposing the Islamic State. Rather than hinder creation of such a coalition by taking charge militarily, Washington should encourage it by stepping back. Washington 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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