



Barack Obama Is Fourth President To Put Americans At Risk In Iraq: U.S. Should Stay Out And Leave The Fight To Others

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President [Barack Obama](#) has become the fourth straight president to order military action in Iraq. His airstrikes destroyed American military equipment captured from the U.S.-supplied Iraqi army, which a decade ago American forces defeated and disarmed.

The last president who didn't bomb Iraq, Ronald Reagan, acted as a de facto ally of Baghdad in the latter's aggressive war against Iran, which later encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait. That in turn led to the first Gulf War, years of sanctions and periodic bombing, the 2003 invasion, and now the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Unless President Obama pulls back quickly, his administration risks becoming absorbed in another interminable, unnecessary war in Mesopotamia with unpredictable but almost certainly negative consequences.

ISIL's rise is both a geopolitical failure and humanitarian disaster. However, so far the organization threatens the security of other nations, not America. Nor does the president have legal authority, necessary from Congress under the Constitution, to go to war again in Iraq.

The temptation to act is strong. After all, Christians and other religious minorities already suffered catastrophe as a result of U.S. policy. There were a million or more Christians in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion. After [Washington](#)'s intervention blew the country apart and triggered sectarian conflict, more than half of them were driven abroad—many fled to Syria, where they ended up in grave danger again.

Only about 400,000 were thought to remain in Iraq before ISIL's rise, with half or more in the north. What was once a refuge now threatens to become a death trap. Many if not a majority of them have been forced to flee or face persecution or worse at ISIL's hands. So too the Yaisidis,

viewed as apostates by Islamic extremists. Tens of thousands fled the city of Sinjar after the Kurdish defenders were ousted. Many are trapped in mountainous terrain in dire circumstances.

America should offer sanctuary to those escaping ISIL's depredations. The disappearance of Christians, who predate Muslims, from the Middle East is a historic, cultural, and personal tragedy accelerated by Washington's counterproductive war-making. The administration could airlift refugees out as well as drop in supplies. But a relief operation should not become an excuse for turning America into a belligerent.

In his Thursday address President Obama defended limited airstrikes "to protect American personnel" involved in "a humanitarian effort" to help the Yazidis. Unfortunately, in practice America's friends and enemies alike might miss the distinction, especially since, the president added, the administration was "providing urgent assistance to Iraqi government and Kurdish forces" to better fight ISIL.

Indeed, the initial strikes were suspiciously broad—not on forces attacking U.S. personnel, but on artillery firing on *Kurdish troops* defending the *Kurdish city* where U.S. personnel *were located*. The second round of attacks hit mortar positions and an ISIL convoy. Today in his brief weekly address the president promised more attacks if ISIL "attempted to advance further." The same rationale would justify Washington lending the Air Force to the Maliki government to stop any ISIL move on Baghdad.

The president did insist that he would "not allow the United States to be dragged in fighting another war in Iraq." He reiterated that commitment today, stating that "there's no American military solution to the larger crisis."

However, President Obama repeatedly termed ISIL "terrorist," creating a justification for broader action. Pentagon officials have referred to ISIL as "the enemy" and in a *New York Times* interview published today the president suggested his willingness to join a refashioned Iraqi government to "push back" the group. Then he told reporters, before going on vacation, that the bombing could go on for months and after an Iraqi "rebuilding" the U.S. military could "engage in some offense." This all goes far beyond what he previously told the American people.

In fact, it is not easy to be just a little bit pregnant in combat. Pressure will increase to do more than ameliorate one symptom of ISIL's rise and the administration will find it hard to turn back. Securing Kurdistan and strengthening the government in Baghdad would require more than a few bombs.

Even a lot of bombs might have limited effectiveness, as was evident even during the desert conflict in Libya. The president insisted in his address today that "combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq," but airpower is unlikely to suppress a religiously motivated insurgency against the corrupt, incompetent Iraqi authorities. Moreover, any military involvement puts U.S. credibility at stake, encouraging the administration to ever escalate to rescue a failing policy.

Intervention threatens blowback. For years U.S. bombing appears to have created more enemies of America than it has killed. The 13-year-long Global War on Terrorism destroyed the international al-Qaeda organization but spawned a multitude of al-Qaeda-like national splinter groups. Until now ISIL has sought to become a *de facto* government and state, rather than act as a terrorist organization. That establishes an “address” for retaliation, giving ISIL an important incentive not to follow al-Qaeda’s anti-American *raison d’etre*. If Washington becomes a belligerent, ISIL’s international aspirations are likely to change.

An even greater danger is turning America into a participant in Iraq’s complicated sectarian struggle. Today former Baathists and Sunni tribes, some of which worked with U.S. forces against Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the “Sunni Awakening,” are loosely allied with ISIL against the Shia-dominated national government. Washington should not turn millions of Sunni Iraqis into enemies.

Nor is it easy to resolve a regional conflict by intervening in one small place in Iraq. ISIL is threatening Christians, Yasidis, and Kurds because it defeated the ineffective central government’s demoralized forces in Mosul. ISIL established its fighting prowess and gained much of its materiel from the ongoing Syrian civil war. If the administration is going to [risk](#) U.S. involvement in the fighting, it will be hard to confine military action to one small part of the multi-national battlefield.

Creeping escalation would risk a repeat of the president’s predecessors’ mistakes in Iraq. Absent a quick exit, the president may face an expanding conflict which comes to divert his personal attention, absorb his political capital, and taint his legacy, just as Iraq did to George W. Bush. President Obama still has time to step back before the U.S. becomes a formal belligerent.

Washington should emphasize that the Islamist Sunni insurgency is a problem made in Baghdad. The U.S. invested heavily in a military which became a sectarian tool of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. His misrule encouraged Sunni tribes and former Baathists to journey back into the 7th Century with ISIL in order to oust their Shia oppressors. A political *modus vivendi*, whether a more inclusive national government, radical federalism, formal partition, or something else is necessary to split the coalition between religious extremism and everyday sectarianism.

The administration also should revisit policy in Syria. The Obama administration believed President Bashar al-Assad to be a “reformer” before declaring him to be international enemy number one. It turns out that he’s somewhere in between. His regime is vile, but ISIL is worse. Equally important, the Assad government threatens no fundamental U.S. interests. Far more dangerous would be a regional ISIL “caliphate.” Washington should stop trying to overthrow the Damascus regime.

The U.S. should drop the ISIL problem into the laps of neighboring countries. For instance, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia, have funded extremist factions fighting Assad and Turkey is rumored to have allowed movement of ISIL fights into Syria. These nations must recognize the danger of blowback if Islamic extremists destabilize much of the Middle East.

The Sunni Arab regimes need to help delegitimize ISIL. The pleas of Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and Shiites are not likely to shake the movement's followers. Other Sunnis may be more effective in reducing ISIL's appeal, especially to those who today have allied with extremists for purely tactical reasons. These governments also could provide aid to those displaced. Such efforts obviously would be aided by a nonsectarian government in Baghdad.

More directly, nations on the group's target list should take the lead in offering military assistance to the Kurds and Iraqi central government, and intervening directly. Israel could act unofficially, disguising its efforts where possible. Iranian involvement is hardly problem-free, but Tehran has an interest in preventing an ISIL conquest of Iraq. Amman has a professional air force and an incentive to stop the Islamist group before the latter reaches Jordan.

Turkey has an even larger military. Ankara so far has focused on ousting the Syrian government, but a collapse of Iran's Kurdistan could trigger large refugee flows into Turkey's Kurdish areas. Nor is ISIL likely to stop its subversion at Turkey's border. Given the Erdogan government's improved relationship with Kurds in both Turkey and Iraq, Ankara could offer military assistance to Kurdistan.

While ISIL is a critical problem in the short-term, it may be self-correcting in the long-term. It is one thing to overrun a wide expanse of territory poorly defended by ill-coordinated and ill-prepared forces. It is quite another to consolidate control and actually rule. Clashes already have been reported between ISIL fighters and Sunnis who want to live in the 21st Century. Enhanced political cooperation in Baghdad, more responsible behavior by ISIL-enablers like Saudi Arabia, military involvement by such threatened nations as Jordan and Turkey, and an allied shift away from the anti-Assad campaign could generate an overwhelming coalition against ISIL.

Washington has spent decades attempting to micro-manage the Middle East. Virtually every U.S. plan has misfired, collapsed, or exploded. Perhaps nowhere have American officials done worse than in Iraq. ISIL would not exist but for George W. Bush's misguided invasion of Iraq. Heck'uva job, George & Neocon Co.! Still, perhaps most striking is how little the consequences usually affect the U.S., except when Washington chooses to make the problems America's own. The impact looks especially modest compared to the negative results of constantly intervening. It turns out that being a superpower has at least one big advantage: other nations' misfortunes often don't have that much effect.

There still are well-founded humanitarian desires to help in Iraq and elsewhere. Unfortunately, however, options today are limited. Instead of jumping into another unnecessary and counterproductive war, Washington should step back, temper its ambitions, and place responsibility on regional players with more at stake in the conflicts and greater ability to solve the problems. The third time definitely isn't the charm for war in Iraq.

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